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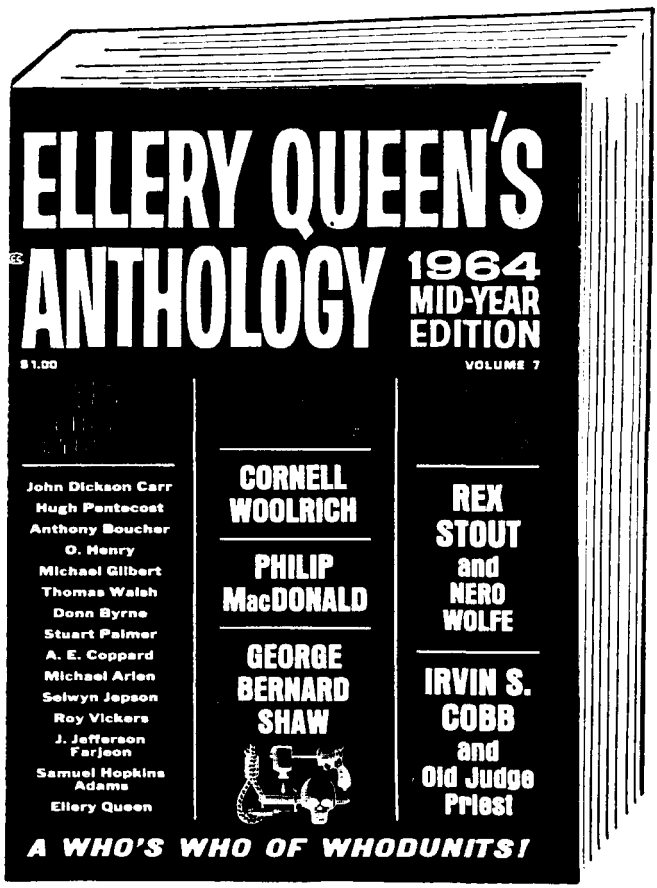

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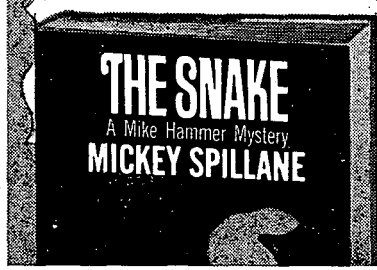

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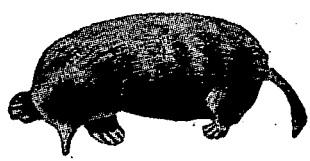

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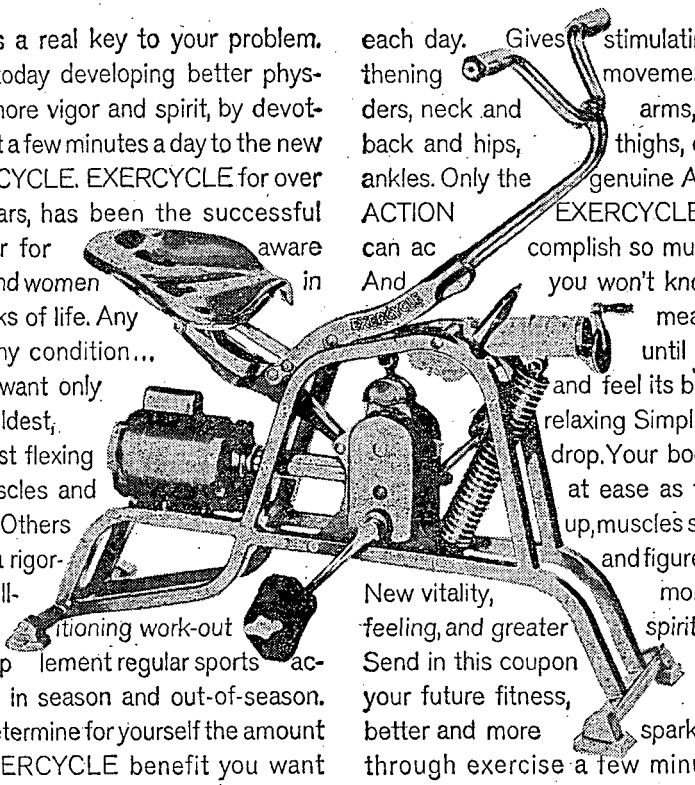

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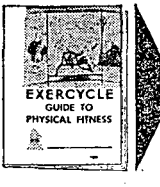

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a new police procedural story

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AUTHOR:	**LAWRENCE TREAT**
TITLE:	***C As in Clue***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVES:	Lieutenant Decker and staff
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*There hadn't been a homicide in nearly a month, but when it came it was a beaut—The Case of the Female Lobster . . . Corpse: a young, attractive blonde.*

LIEUTENANT DECKER, CHIEF OF Homicide, sat is his cubbyhole of an office that overflowed with stacks of papers and magazines and miscellaneous junk. He was a tall, spare, gray-haired man crowding sixty. He was relaxed now as he gazed serenely at the small stuffed crocodile on top of the bookcase opposite him. Its jaws were wide open, set to snap your arm off if you got close enough.

He'd found the thing in an antique shop ten years ago and had brought it home. Martha, his wife, had let out a howl and told him to bring it to his office, where it belonged. He complied, and by now it was a kind of trademark—it tagged him as the screwball of the Homicide Department.

He winked at the croc. There hadn't been a homicide in nearly a month. In a town this size—approximately 200,000—you got one murder every couple of weeks or so, and usually knocked it off without too much trouble. For the rest, his eight-man Homicide Squad handled all crimes of violence, which kept them moving.

But business was slack and he'd sent the boys out patrolling. He supposed they were sitting around

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somewhere and lapping up beer. And information. Making their contacts the easy way, and why not?

The Lieutenant swung around in his swivel chair and listened to it squeal. The sound gave him a comfortable, easy feeling, which lasted until the phone rang and he picked it up.

"Decker, Homicide," he said.

The communications sergeant spoke. "Signal Seventeen," he said. "2832 Emerson Avenue, second floor. Woman stabbed, they think it happened yesterday or the day before."

"Who thinks so?" Decker said sharply—to let the guy know that opinions were out of order at this stage of the game. Then, disinterested in the sergeant, Decker slapped down the phone, kicked open the office door, and called out to his secretary. Marilyn, the blonde. He insisted on having a good-looking girl out there—to give the Department tone.

"Seventeen," he sang out. "Double-check it with the gang if you can contact them, and send them over. 2832 Emerson. Anybody around?"

Before she could answer, the door of the Squad Room opened, and Bankhart and Mitch Taylor stepped out. They'd heard. Signal Seventeen, Homicide, with everybody rolling.

"What goes?" they asked.

"We do," Decker said. He walked out briskly, with Taylor and Bankhart behind him, marched past the sergeant's desk, through the swinging doors, and out to the courtyard where his car was parked.

He drove, not too fast but with the siren screaming. Big, rangy Bankhart sat in front, twisted around so he could jabber away at Mitch Taylor, sitting alone in back and looking like a pouter pigeon that they wouldn't let strut. He and Bank had been needling each other about a robbery they'd worked on last week. Bank claimed they'd messed up the investigation, Taylor disagreed, and they kept up a steady patter of hyperbole—which was a word neither of them had probably ever heard of.

Decker didn't bother listening. Let them grumble and grouse. Good for them. His spine prickled and he had a hunch this case was going to be big; but he couldn't put his finger on a reason. Maybe there was none, but according to the law of averages a big one was due.

Emerson Avenue was an average middle-class residential district—$25,000 two-family homes, shingle or clapboard construction, not new. Number 2832 was at the end of the street, with a vacant lot on one side and nothing much beyond the lot.

The house was painted white, and it had a porch and an outside staircase leading up to the second-floor apartment. A couple of precinct cars were parked at the curb, and next to them some uniformed

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cops were talking to a broad, heavy-set man.

Decker pulled up alongside. One of the cops came over and saluted.

"He called us," the cop said, pointing to the heavy-set man. "We had to break into the place, and we found her."

"Found who?" Decker asked.

"Mrs. Samuel Harrington—first name's Vera. Her husband worked for that guy." The patrolman pointed to the heavy-set man again. "He came to see why Harrington didn't show up for work."

"Right," Decker said. "I'll have a look first, then I'll talk to him."

He went up the wooden stairs. The front door opened onto a small kitchen, and she was lying there. She was blonde, and she'd been young and slim and attractive. He stood there quietly, taking in the scene. Bankhart and Taylor flanked him, and Taylor spoke in his high-pitched voice, stating the obvious.

"She was fixing dinner," he said. "Got the salad ready and had started cooking—you can still smell it. No weapon around, and somebody turned off the stove."

Decker grunted, walked carefully around the body, and entered the living room. It was neat, well-furnished, and nothing was disturbed. On a side table he saw a bottle of gin, a bottle of vermouth, a pitcher, and a bowl of water that must have started out as ice.

Decker crossed the room, examined a bedroom, then a study, then a small bare room with an old bureau and a studio couch. He saw nothing of obvious importance—nothing that looked like the murder weapon.

He clattered briskly downstairs, nodded to the cops, and addressed the heavy-set man. "You knew her. What's your name?"

"Tugwell," the man answered. "James Joseph Tugwell. I'm sales manager for McCabe and Dennison—we make athletic trophies, class rings, and so on. Sam Harrington worked for us."

"Tell me about him," Decker asked.

"He's one of our best men. He'd been out selling, he phoned in the day before yesterday—"

"Tuesday?" Decker said, interrupting.

"That's right. Tuesday morning. From Cleveland. He said he'd done fine and was coming home that night, and he'd be in the office the next day. That would have been Wednesday, yesterday."

"What time did he phone?"

"Around ten," Tugwell said. "When he didn't show up the next morning, I figured he was sleeping late or had a hangover."

"You let the whole day go by?" Decker asked.

"It had happened before, but when he didn't show up this morning and didn't answer the phone, I came over. The door was locked, his car—the gray one in the driveway, over there—was parked, but

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nobody answered the doorbell. So I called the police."

"What kind of a man was he?"

"Just a nice easy-going guy. Everybody liked him."

"What was she like?" Decker asked.

Tugwell shrugged. "You saw her."

"I didn't see her in action," Decker said sharply.

"Neither did I," Tugwell said. "But I have an idea that she liked to play around."

"What gave you that idea? Ever try?"

"Me? I—" The reason for the question sank in slowly. "You don't suspect *me*, do you? I have a wife and kids. I don't get mixed up with other women."

"We'll find out about that," Decker said.

But the evidence pointed to a single conclusion. Sam Harrington had come home, had had an argument with his wife, killed her, and run off in a panic. Forgetting his car. Just traveling to nowhere.

Maybe.

After that, the various other police units arrived, crowded into the small kitchen, and stepped on each other's toes. Decker briefed a few of them while he put his own men to work and got things going as fast as he could.

There was plenty to do. Canvass the block and find out what the neighbors had seen and what they knew about the Harringtons. Locate the Philip Waite who lived downstairs, and bring him here. Check with the bank on the Harrington finances, find their address book and get in touch with some of their friends. Build up the picture of Vera and Sam. Ask around if she had a boy friend. Examine Sam's car, which still had his baggage and sample cases in it. See if anybody had noticed him come home, and if so, pinpoint the time. Trace Vera's actions, where she'd gone, whom she'd spoken to, what she'd said.

Meanwhile, the experts gathered. The Medical Examiner wanted to monopolize the kitchen, and he growled at anybody who came near him. The photographers set up tripods, snapped pictures of the body, cleared the living room, and tried to get a few shots of it. Jub Freeman, Homicide's lab man, dusted for fingerprints and complained that half of them would probably turn out to be police prints. The precinct Lieutenant snapped orders at his men and tried to impress the Commissioner. The Commissioner prowled around aimlessly, smelled what Vera had been cooking, opened the refrigerator, and found a bottle of champagne. "Good stuff," he commented. "Expensive."

The reporters jammed the entrance, jotted down whatever remarks they overheard, and fired questions at everybody within range. A newspaper photographer

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climbed the roof, tried to sneak into a second-story window, slipped, and almost broke his neck. The D.A. arrived late and conferred with the Commissioner and Decker, and wanted to know why they hadn't picked up somebody for questioning.

Decker, cheerful and efficient, moved through the mob, examining the apartment, handing out assignments, looking for signs of a fight or an argument, searching for the weapon. He couldn't afford to slip up; he was like an acrobat dancing on a high wire while he read a book, sang a song, directed the band, signaled his helper down below, and tried to think up a new routine and anaylze the one he was doing.

Easy. All you needed was a little experience.

Gradually a pattern began to form in his mind, and the questions began to emerge clearly. Had Vera expected Sam home on Tuesday evening? Had she prepared dinner for him, or did he surprise her entertaining somebody else? But chiefly, where was Sam?

There was always the chance that a burglar had committed the murder, but Decker discounted this theory. No sign of a fight, therefore she'd probably known her killer. So Decker was pretty sure that either a lover had killed her and killed Sam, too (but then where was Sam's body?) or Sam had killed her and taken a powder; but if he was panicky enough to leave his car behind, would he bother to turn off the stove so that the potato water wouldn't boil away and burn the pot?

Decker was hoping the Medical Examiner would come up with something new—maybe a lead to Sam's murder—but he didn't. He said Vera Harrington had been killed sometime Tuesday evening, and that the wound was the type that could come from an ordinary kitchen knife. Beyond that, he wouldn't commit himself. Then he released the body, watched them wrap it up and cart it out, and went home to lunch.

There were a half dozen cops in the kitchen at the time, and when the body and the doctor were gone, you could almost sense the relief. For a few seconds nobody spoke. Then, in the silence, they all heard the rapping, followed by a kind of gurgling noise.

It came from back of the stove. Commissioner Sturm walked over, reached down, lifted the lid off the pail, and let out a yell. He jumped back, and from his scream you could tell he was hurt. He waved his arm and pinwheeled it, and something darkish was wrapped around his fingers. He slapped at it with his other hand, and a lobster went flying across the room and landed in the sink.

Sturm held up his finger. "The son of a so-and-so bit me," he roared. "Get hold of the doc. I can get

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blood poisoning from a thing like this."

A cop went to the door and called out to the Medical Examiner to come back, that somebody was hurt. The Commissioner took exception. "Somebody hell!" he said. "It's me!"

The Medical Examiner tramped back up the stairs, learned what had happened, and grinned. "Come on in the bathroom," he said, "where I can operate. Anybody here know how to administer anesthesia?"

"Stop kidding," Sturm said. His hand was bleeding and he held it up so everybody could see. "I'll get even with that damned lobster," he said. "At dinner."

Bankhart crossed the room to the sink, reached down and grabbed the lobster expertly. "Got unpegged," he announced. He glanced at the stuff on the sink and found a small brush. He broke off the handle and with a deft movement shoved it into the open claw of the flapping lobster.

"That'll keep him," he remarked. He turned the lobster over and examined the underside. "My error," he said. "Her."

Decker wondered at that particular bit of crustacean lore—how Bankhart could tell a female lobster from a male. But the lobster clue was one of those little odds and ends in a murder case that might turn out to be important, that it might pay to follow up as soon as possible. So he spoke to Bankhart.

"Bank," he said, "why don't you cover the local markets and find out where she bought it? You might pick up something."

"If she asked for a female," Bankhart said, "they'll probably remember her. Not many people know the difference, but the females are sweeter."

"Where'd you learn all about lobsters?" Decker asked.

Bankhart drew himself up and said gently, "Born in Maine, Lieutenant. Finest lobsters in the world." And he went out.

A few seconds later Mitch Taylor came upstairs to report that Sam Harrington had been seen coming home on Tuesday evening, driving his gray sedan into the driveway. Nobody was definite about the time, but it was probably a little after six, and not later than six thirty.

"I covered the opposite side of the street," Taylor went on. "The Harrington female didn't mix much with the neighbors, but I got the idea she'd been monkeying around with anything in pants."

"Who?" Decker said.

"Maybe the guy downstairs. Maybe the guy across the street. But the main thing is, they say whenever her husband was away on a trip, this green convertible would show up. Late model Buick, but nobody remembers the plates."

"Anything to identify it?" Decker asked.

"Red leather upholstery, and the guy driving it had a good build

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and knew how to dress. Nobody ever saw him real close, but he was here Tuesday around six. Trouble is, nobody saw him leave, on account everybody on the street eats dinner around half-past six. What are you going to do with that lobster?"

"Sneak it out of here when the Commissioner isn't looking," Decker said, "and keep it for a pet."

"Yeah," Taylor said. "It looks like pretty good eating." He licked his lips.

Little Balenky, who had covered the Harrington side of the block, corroborated what Taylor had said, but had a few details to add.

"Leo Rogge, he lives next door and he saw the driver when the guy left. Says he had a handkerchief wrapped around his hand, like he'd hurt it."

"Can Rogge identify?"

Balenky shook his head. "Not to amount to much."

"Find out anything else?" Decker asked.

"A couple of things. Rogge's an investment counselor and said he handled stuff for the Harringtons. But when I questioned him, it turned out he just handled Vera's money. She gave him a thousand at a time, in cash. Four thousand over the last two years. Sounds like it might be something."

Decker nodded—it sounded like possible blackmail. He went downstairs, circled the fence that divided the Harrington and Rogge lots, and knocked on the Rogge front door.

Leo Rogge, a chubby, out-going man with a persuasive voice, came to the porch and explained that his wife was away for a few days, visiting relatives. He was anxious to impress Decker with how well Vera Harrington's investments had turned out.

"Nearly a fifty per cent increase in one year," he said. "Let me show you her portfolio, it's a beauty."

"I'm not interested in what she made," Decker said crisply. "I'd like to know where she got it."

"That," Rogge said, "is none of my business."

"You knew the Harringtons pretty well," Decker said. "How did they get along?"

"We had a strictly business relationship," Rogge said. "We didn't socialize. But if you're interested in a good stock—" He broke off abruptly and waved to somebody behind Decker. "There's a guy who knew her better," he said. "Ask *him*."

Decker wheeled. Caswell, driving a squad car and talking to a big husky guy wearing a checked jacket, pulled up in front of the Rogge house and motioned to Decker. The Lieutenant walked over.

"This," Caswell said, "is Philip Waite. Lives downstairs in the Harrington house."

Waite nodded pleasantly. "Got me out of school," he said. "I

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teach. Tomorrow, I'll be able to tell my class all about a police investigation."

"What do you teach?" Decker asked.

"Physical education," Waite answered, inflating his chest.

Decker stepped into the rear of the car, settled himself comfortably, and crossed his legs. "Is Rogge a friend of yours?" he asked.

Waite laughed. "That crook? I wouldn't trust him with a phony dime."

"He doesn't trust you much, either," Decker remarked, and proceeded to more pertinent questions.

Waite either couldn't or wouldn't help. He claimed he wasn't interested in the Harringtons—he went his way and they went theirs. He was engaged to be married, had dinner with his fiancée on Tuesday evening. He'd come home for a little while, got dressed, and gone out.

"What time?" Decker asked.

Waite didn't know—he never kept track of time; but eventually Decker pinned him down to around six. But Waite claimed he hadn't seen the green car, hadn't noticed anything unusual, hadn't seen Vera in days. Decker got the impression that Waite had played around with Vera, but was anxious to keep out of the case. He taught school and was coming up for tenure.

Decker, however, didn't have the time or inclination to go into Waite's relationship with Vera. Decker was interested in Tuesday's events. And in that lobster.

Bankhart hadn't found out where Vera had bought it. She'd done some shopping locally and carried her packages home.

"I even called Bill's," Bankhart said, "at the other side of town. Best sea food place there is, but they didn't remember her."

"Lobsters all look alike to me," Decker said thoughtfully. "Male—female—how do you tell the difference?"

"The appendages just behind the shell, on the underside," Bankhart said. "In the female they're crossed, in the male they're long and pointed. Easy."

Back in his office, Decker sent out a general pick-up for Sam Harrington. Locally, he sent a teletype to all precincts to check parking lots, garages, and dealers for a green Buick convertible, late model, whose owner was tall and well-dressed, and might have a bandage on his hand.

Later, Decker spoke to the reporters. The Commissioner had held a formal press conference and outlined the case, but Decker was famous for his give-and-take sessions. He usually had a few ideas and some human interest stuff for the reporters, but this time he knocked them dead.

"We got an eyewitness," he announced.

"Who? Who is he? What did he say?"

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"She," Decker said solemnly. "She was right there when it happened, but she can't talk. The trouble is, she's a lobster."

So that was the way the papers handled it: The Case of the Female Lobster.

The next day dragged. The gang was tired—they'd worked late the night before and they'd started out early this morning.

The M.E. reported that Vera had been pregnant. The murder weapon was still missing, and so was Sam. He'd either killed, or been killed. Various alibis were being checked, but the process was slow, and Decker had limited manpower. Tugwell, Rogge, Waite, the owner of the green Buick—any one of them might be involved. There was no proof one way or the other.

Decker was despondent about not finding Sam. He called his wife every couple of hours and talked to her about nothing in particular, just to hear the sound of her voice. And she understood, chatted briefly, and said she'd be home all day, just in case he wanted anything.

At odd moments he kept thinking about that car. Maybe a couple of thousand Buicks in town. How many of them were green convertibles with red upholstery? And what were the chances of locating the right one?

About noon on Friday the break came. A cop up in the second precinct spotted a car in a parking lot, and the parking lot attendant said the guy parked there regularly, that he was tall, dark-haired, good-looking, and had recently hurt his hand.

So that was it—an alert cop who'd get a commendation or a promotion out of it. The Motor Vehicle Bureau said the plates were registered under the name of Bertram Scott, 37 years old, 194 Popper Drive. All they had to do now was bring him in.

At two p.m. Bertram Scott arrived, under police escort. He was a handsome, Hollywood type, and you could imagine him tearing around in his convertible and sweeping Vera off her feet. But it took some imagination, because right now he was ready to crawl.

Decker, with Caswell and Joe Small to help with the interrogation, sat Scott down in the small office and got his vital statistics. Then the three of them gave Scott long, searching stares.

"What happened to your finger?" Decker asked, almost casually.

"I caught it in a door."

"Let's see it," Decker said. Scott, obviously suspicious of a cop who was so solicitous about a minor injury, reluctantly held out his finger. Decker examined it with care, even with sympathy. "The door had claws?" he asked.

Scott pulled his hand back, shifted uneasily, and didn't answer.

"Why did you kill Vera Harrington?" Decker asked abruptly.

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"I didn't! I wasn't even near her place. I hadn't seen her in weeks."

"Don't give me that," Decker said. "I know. I've got you cold. You were there Tuesday evening, around six. Everybody on the block saw you. And when you left her, you had a handkerchief wrapped around your finger—it was bleeding. Brother, I know what I'm talking about—so get some sense and admit it."

Scott bit his lips. He realized there was no point in further denial—not when Decker obviously knew so many details.

"All right, I was there," he said in a low voice. "But I didn't kill her."

"Let's have the story, and straight."

"I brought her a lobster," Scott said, still speaking in a subdued voice. "She'd asked me to. From Bill's. She didn't have a car and it was too far for her to go and get one."

"What kind of a lobster did you bring?" Decker asked.

"A female. Vera liked the roe."

Decker scrawled a note, "Tell Bankhart to check at Bill's," and handed the note to Caswell, who went outside. Decker said to Scott, "Go ahead. What was so important about the lobster?"

"Sam was due back and she wanted to have a sort of celebration with him. She planned to tell him she was going to have a baby and settle down."

"Then she said the two of you were washed up, and you had an argument."

"No argument," Scott said nervously. "We simply agreed that everything was over."

"Who bit you? Vera or the lobster?"

Scott looked at his hand. "The lobster. When I took it out of the bag to put it in the pail of water, it bit me. The peg had worked loose somehow."

"Did it hurt when you got nipped?" Decker asked quietly.

"Sure it did. I yelled my head off."

"All right. Yell for me."

Scott stared at Decker as if the Lieutenant were insane. Decker swung his chair around, then gave Scott a sudden sharp kick in the shin. Scott let out a loud yell.

"Thanks," Decker said. "I wanted to hear your lung power. How long did you stay at Vera's?"

"Only a few minutes—just long enough to say goodbye. We parted good friends."

"Nuts!" Decker said sharply. "You'd been paying her off. She'd been blackmailing you."

"I'd given her money, but I can afford it."

Decker didn't push it. He was going easy, angling for facts he could check.

Bankhart phoned from Bill's. Scott had bought the lobster there—Bill remembered because Scott had insisted on a female.

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The phone rang again. Jub Freeman, who had been examining the green convertible for bloodstains or other evidence relating to Sam Harrington, called down from the lab.

"No soap," Jub said. "Couldn't find a thing."

So Decker had to do it the hard way—apply the pressure and rely on his wits to spot the small opening, and then hammer away. He had the classic situation of a well-to-do man having a clandestine affair with an attractive married blonde, whom he was paying off.

Scott, however, refused to break, and after a couple of hours Decker was willing to admit that Scott might be telling the truth. It was time to check with the Commissioner and decide whether to hold Scott or let him go. Decker turned the questioning over to Caswell and Small, and went up to Commissioner Sturm's office.

The Commissioner still had a bandage on his finger, and a grudge against the world. He listened impatiently to Decker.

"Scott was the last man to see her," Sturm said, after Decker had finished. "He had motive, he had opportunity. Right? So get a confession."

"Maybe he didn't kill her," Decker said.

Sturm snorted. "His girl threw him over, a lobster bit him, and he was sore. He took it out on her. What more do you want?"

"I want Sam," Decker said grimly. "Dead or alive."

"Then find him. That's your job. You don't expect me to dig him up for you, do you?"

Lieutenant Decker started to speak, and then a strange expression crossed his face. He spoke almost as if in a trance. "No," he said quietly. "I'll do that little thing myself."

"What do you mean?" Sturm asked.

"You got it," Decker said, "right on the button!"

"Got what?"

"Harrington's dead—he was killed when he came home. We've been pretty sure of that ever since the first day. The question was how the body was moved without anybody seeing and without leaving a clue. The answer is—Sam never got inside his house!"

"Possible," Sturm said.

"Possible, hell! It's logical. He was intercepted by somebody who came around the back of the house, out of Sam's sight."

"That makes it either Waite, who had played around with her, or Rogge, who had handled her money."

"Right," Decker said. "We don't know which, so let's call him Mr. X, and I'll tell you what must have happened.

"Mr. X is coming down the front stairs, he still has the murder knife, maybe concealed under his jacket, and Sam drives up and says hello.

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If Sam gets into his apartment and finds his wife dead Mr. X is sunk. So X thinks fast, tells Sam his wife isn't in, makes up some plausible excuse to get Sam into X's place for a minute. Sam goes, gets killed, and his body is still there. It has to be!"

"Rogge or Waite," Sturm said. "Who do you think?"

"I'll tell you later," Decker said. "All I need right now is a search warrant and a shovel."

At Headquarters they still talk about it—how the Chief of Homicide loaded a shovel and a pickax in his car, and went digging—and came back with a prisoner and a confession.

"Sam was buried in Rogge's cellar," Decker told Sturm later. "He'd embezzled the money she gave him to invest. She wanted it back, threatened to take legal action, and that meant disgrace and jail for Rogge. That's why he killed her. The rest of it happened pretty much the way I figured it out."

"How did you know it was Rogge, and not Waite?" Sturm asked.

"The lobster," Decker said.

Which was no answer to Sturm's question.

But that night, when Decker was home with Martha, he explained the remark.

"If Waite had been downstairs and heard Scott scream when he got bit, Waite would probably have gone upstairs to see what the trouble was. But even if he hadn't, he would have told me about it, in self-protection. He didn't, so he wasn't home. Therefore—Rogge."

Martha smiled and leaned her head on Decker's shoulder. "Smart husband," she said.

He put his arm around her. "Smart lobster," he said, "for a female."

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a new story by

MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD

TITLE: *A Case for the UN*

TYPE: Legal Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Sir Eric Milbanke, Q.C.

LOCALE: In the air, over the Atlantic

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *In which Bartholomew Evans, a seemingly harmless little man, did the impossible—and almost got away with it . . . There ought to be a law.*

THE ONE-CLASS DC-4 PLANE, bound east from Montreal to Paris, was carrying less than its capacity of 40 passengers. It was the off-season, and Canadian Transatlantic was not the biggest or most favored airline. But it was comfortably full, and Mavis Brook, the stewardess, looked the passengers over with an approving eye. There were no babies and no farewell-party drunks; it would be an easy trip.

"Any freaks aboard this time?" teased Bob Kemper, the pilot, when she went up front to take the first cups of coffee to Kemper, Ed Rodman the copilot, and Louis Pellereaux the flight engineer. Mavis had round hazel eyes, curly hair, a cuddly figure, and was easy to tease —she had no sense of humor.

"No, thank goodness," she answered seriously. "Just one man who seems a little—well, odd. He was the first one on, grabbed a rear seat, and has sat ever since with his face behind a newspaper that he isn't reading. He didn't want a cocktail, and he hardly touched his dinner."

Kemper winked at Rodman. "*Must* be something wrong," he announced solemnly, still teasing, "with anyone who wants privacy, huh, Ed?"

"Sure thing. Anyone who doesn't get chummy with everybody else—

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watch out, Mavis, he might be an escaping criminal!"

"Oh, do you think so?" Mavis turned pale.

"For heaven's sake, girl, we're only kidding. Go on back and forget it."

When she returned to the cabin her eyes darted again to the man in the back seat. He was still buried in his newspaper. He looked harmless —a bald, middle-aged little man with dark glasses . . . but you never could tell.

Mavis glanced at the other passengers as she took away the dinner dishes and answered queries. All of them were unremarkable, except—

She peered curiously at a man and a woman sitting up front, on opposite sides of the aisle. They had come in separately and had never spoken to each other; but every once in a while the woman would turn and look at the man, or the man at the woman, and if ever two people were crazy about each other it was those two—who nevertheless acted like strangers.

When she had a minute, Mavis consulted the passenger list. The little man in the rear was Bartholomew Evans, of New York. She must be mistaken about the seemingly enamored couple: he was Italian, Giuseppe Falconari, from Rome; she was Renée Blanc, from Lyons. And, Mavis noted, the nearest thing to a V.I.P. aboard was Sir Eric Milbanke, Q.C., whatever that meant. She stole a look at him—a tall, white-haired man immersed in a legal-looking tome from which he was making notes in red ink.

Mavis sighed; as a celebrity he was a complete washout, not worth approaching for an autograph. Mavis was an ardent autograph collector—but she preferred movie stars.

Everything was serene when the plane left Gander and started for Shannon. The passengers settled down to sleep. Sir Eric had been the last to turn out his reading light. Mavis settled down too, in a rear seat across the aisle from the little man, who now seemed to be asleep. The only sound was a duet of snores from two passengers. Mavis took off her shoes and fell into a catnap which even the softest signal would interrupt.

At three o'clock in the morning they were over the mid-Atlantic.

It was then that the little man in the rear, Bartholomew Evans, got quietly to his feet. No one paid any attention to him; others had arisen from time to time and gone back to the lavatory.

Evans stepped forward silently until he stood in the aisle between Renée Blanc and Giuseppe Falconari, who were now sound asleep, their heads buried in pillows.

Very calmly and deliberately, Evans drew a pistol from his pocket, and shot both of them through the head.

Immediately there was pandemonium. Startled passengers awoke, jumped up, cried out. Mavis ran to

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the cockpit, forgetting her shoes, and almost collided with Kemper as he opened the door and hurried to the scene.

The murderer made no attempt to move. He stood there with the smoking pistol still in his hand. Not a sound came from either of his victims; there was not even much blood. Both had been killed instantly.

The pilot took command at once.

"Please resume your seats," Kemper ordered, hoping his voice was steady. He had heard plenty of stories of sensational events on other planes, but this was his first and, he hoped, his last experience of this kind. "See to this lady," he added to Mavis; an elderly woman sitting nearby was in hysterics. Mavis, her legs trembling, ministered to the woman and got her quieted down. There was little noise otherwise; most of the passengers were too shocked to speak.

A heavy-set man stood up and started toward the murderer. Kemper stopped him with a gesture. The responsibility—and the danger—were his.

"Give me the gun," he demanded of Evans.

The coolest person on board was the murderer.

"Certainly, Captain," Evans replied politely, placing the gun in Kemper's outstretched hand. "And you needn't tie me up. I'm not going to pull any doors open and jump out, or do anything foolish."

Unexpectedly somebody laughed. Someone else reached blindly for a paper bag and was sick in it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please keep your seats," the pilot said, his voice steady now. "I know how distressing this must be for you, but there is nothing we can do until we arrive at Shannon. Mavis, I think everybody could use a drink. But first get some blankets to cover these—these two people. And if you, madam, and you, sir, who were sitting next to them would find places elsewhere—"

The suggestion was unnecessary; the victims' neighbors were already hunched in seats farther away.

"Now"—Kemper turned to the still unmoving Evans—"I shall have you placed under guard until I can turn you over to the Eire authorities when we land. Our copilot will have wired ahead, and the police will have been notified. They'll be waiting for you. Now, if two of you gentlemen will volunteer to keep an eye on him—"

The burly man and another stepped forward.

Bartholomew Evans smiled.

"You know, Captain," he said conversationally, "I happen to be a lawyer, and I know a few things that you don't. For instance, though an aircraft in flight has the legal status of a ship at sea, its pilot does not have the power of arrest and detention that a ship's captain has. You have no right whatever to hold or guard me.

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"And the authorities you say will be waiting to apprehend me can do nothing whatever. Eire has no jurisdiction over me. I waited deliberately to do my—deed until we were over the mid-Atlantic. My whole action depended on the fact that no nation in the world has jurisdiction in this matter. I've made very sure of the law. There is *nowhere* I can be held, *nowhere* I can be tried. There is no such thing as a code of international criminal air law, nor is there any Air Police Force."

"Interpol," Kemper muttered uncertainly.

"Interpol," replied the murderer smoothly, "has no police force of its own; it is merely a clearing house for international criminal information. And if you try to invoke the World Court, that has nothing to do with civilian crime. It deals only with cases submitted to it by member countries of the United Nations."

"Is there anything I can do?" Sir Eric murmured. "I'm a lawyer." He gave his name.

Kemper looked helplessly at Sir Eric. The barrister shook his head.

"I'm afraid he's right on all points, so far," Sir Eric said.

"Moreover," Evans continued, "my crucial point is impregnable. While every country has jurisdiction over any aircraft passing over its territory, no country on earth has jurisdiction over a plane that is more than three miles off the coast of any nation.

"Besides which, I might add that this ship is owned by a Canadian company, I myself am a citizen of the United States, and the persons whom I brought to justice belonged to two other nations—she was a French citizen who, though she resided in New York for a long time, never became naturalized, and he was an Italian citizen. Why, even the witnesses, if there were any—"

"I was awake," said Sir Eric curtly. "I saw you rise from your seat and come down the aisle, and before I realized what was happening, I saw you commit a double murder. If you think you are going to go scot-free because of some legal technicality—"

"Oh, come now. I heard you say you're a lawyer yourself, so you know better than anyone how invulnerable my position is. What I was going to say was that even witnesses would probably be of still other nationalities, and I was right. You, sir, are obviously British; and if there are any others—"

A short plump passenger who had not yet uttered a word stood up diffidently.

"Kyashi Nakamura, export business, Tokyo," he said with a jerky little bow. "I too was not asleep. I too saw this happen. It is my eternal regret that I could not in time—"

"Still another nationality," Evans

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interrupted him evenly. "This is better than I could possibly have anticipated. Are you going to assemble witnesses against me from the ends of the earth? And just where would you assemble them?

"Captain, ask this gentleman of my own profession if I am not in fact entirely right—not right 'so far,' as he said, but right all the way. Who has jurisdiction here? Who has the right to arrest me? Where could I be tried? Where could I be—punished, I believe, is the word—if I were convicted? How can I possibly be held at all?"

"Canada—" Kemper suggested feebly.

"Afraid not, old man," said Sir Eric. "The crime was not committed in or over Canada, and a plane is not like an embassy or a consulate, a part of its country of origin."

Suddenly the burly man who had volunteered to guard Evans erupted. He grabbed the imperturbable murderer, only half his size, and thrust out an angry fist. Kemper intercepted the blow before it landed.

"No, please," he begged. "We've had enough violence already. Let's keep our heads and act like adults."

"And let this filthy murderer get away with it? I'll be damned if I'll stand by and see a vicious criminal—"

"I resent those terms, sir," said Bartholomew Evans sharply. "I am an agent of justice. Those two deserved to die." For the first time he showed a sign of emotion. His face reddened and his voice roughened. "That woman—she was traveling under the name she had when I first met her; but she was my wife. And the man with her, pretending not to be, was her lover. Look up her baggage in the hold. You'll find a bag stuffed with everything that was in my safe at home—money, negotiable securities, jewels—everything valuable she could lay her hands on.

"I've had a private detective watching her for months. And I picked one who would understand—I represented him five years ago when he was divorced from a wife just as rotten as mine was. He told me then, 'I wish I'd bumped her off.' Well, he didn't; he even let her get the divorce, and he's been kept poor by alimony ever since. So I knew he'd put his heart into working for me. I paid him plenty, but he did a fine job. He kept right on her track every minute.

"When he told me she and that blackguard were planning to run off, I rushed home from my office, but I was too late. I found her already gone and the safe empty. I'd been planning to divorce her as soon as I had the evidence against her—the only grounds possible in New York—but she knew she'd never have got a cent of alimony out of me, so she beat me to it. She wasn't going to face poverty for her grand passion—not Renée. And he—that scoundrel called himself an artist.

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He had nothing but what she gave him, and that was stolen from me . . . Well, what would you have done? Let them get away with it?"

"Following them, under the circumstances, is understandable," said the British barrister stiffly. "Even following them on the same plane so as not to lose track of them — though how you kept them from knowing you were here in the same cabin—"

"Oh, that. I had luck all the way. They drove to Montreal—in the car I'd given her"—once again his voice choked with rage—"and I flew up with the private detective and got there before they did. It was easy to follow them after that. She'd had her French passport renewed—that's what first alerted my man. I suppose her boy friend had his Italian one, and I travel often and always keep mine up to date. They took a room in a hotel, sold my car, and bought their tickets. My detective booked a seat for me on the same plane—"

"In your own name?"

"Why not? I knew I was perfectly safe. The only tricky thing was getting aboard before they did and keeping them from seeing me. I'd shaved off my mustache and bought these dark glasses, but of course if they had spotted me they'd have run for it. So I arrived early and asked the stewardess for a back seat —said I had paper work to do and would be grateful if I could be the first one permitted aboard—"

"Oh!" cried Mavis, her face scarlet.

"Then all I had to do was keep hidden behind a newspaper and hope they'd not sit near me. Fortunately, they didn't. They were too busy making eyes at each other to look at anyone else. The detective had told me they were traveling separately and pretending not to know each other—I was amused to see they didn't even take seats next to each other."

"But when we got off at Gander? What then?" the pilot asked. Evans' nonchalance was infectious; the murder inquiry was degenerating into a discussion.

"I simply didn't get off. The stewardess said I could stay if I wanted to. After that, it wasn't long before everybody settled down to sleep—at least, I thought everybody had; not that it really mattered. I waited till I was sure we were far enough out over the ocean, and I knew that even if any of the passengers were awake and watching me—as two of you were—I'd be far too quick for them to realize what was happening and to stop me."

"Go back to your seat," Kemper ordered brusquely, casting off the spell. "And you two gentlemen, keep an eye on him."

"I won't give you any trouble," Evans said quietly. The passengers drew back as he went by. The murderer smiled.

"If you'll come into the cockpit with me, Sir Eric," said the pilot,

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"I'd like to have a few words with you."

"You're not going to find any way out, I assure you," Evans called after them blandly. "I'll walk off this plane at Shannon as free as a bird."

Milbanke and Kemper both shuddered as they passed the two motionless forms, now shrouded in blankets. Behind them the passengers broke into whispers, as if the dead could hear. Their horrified, fascinated glances veered from the two victims to the killer. He sat silent, his eyes fixed, his face a mask. The two men assigned to guard him stood in the aisle, blocking him off from the rest of the cabin. Evans ignored them.

Rodman and Pellereaux looked up as the pilot and the barrister entered. Kemper took over the controls.

"I guess you've heard most of it," he said. "This is Sir Eric Milbanke, an English lawyer." They nodded. "I'm hoping he'll be able to suggest some way out of this mess. Have you heard from Shannon yet, Ed?"

"Police will meet the plane. But from what I've gathered, they aren't going to be able to hold him."

"Hey, how about this?" Louis Pellereaux burst out. "If anybody can kill a person on a plane over the ocean and get away with it, why don't we just open a door and push Evans through it?"

"Don't be funny, Louis," said Kemper. "*He* may be a murderer, but I'm not. Any ideas, Sir Eric?"

The barrister wrinkled his forehead as he braced his long lean body against the door.

"None that would be useful, I'm afraid." He paused, then his eyes lit up. "Unless—yes, that's a bare possibility . . . No, I think it may be more than that."

The others waited, hardly breathing.

"This private detective he hired —hmm, let me think . . ."

When Sir Eric Milbanke went back to his seat, the pilot knew what to do.

Just before they reached Shannon, Kemper returned to the cabin and walked up to Bartholomew Evans. The man turned a sardonic gaze on him.

"Couldn't figure out anything, could you?" Evans said. "I noticed that the great Q.C. came back looking pretty downhearted. You might as well wire those Irish cops to go back home. If they lay a hand on me I'll sue them for false arrest."

Kemper turned his back. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I know you want to get away from this plane just as fast as you can; it hasn't been a pleasant trip, and I'm sorry. If Mr. Nakamura will let me know where he can be reached, I'll be obliged; I've already got that information from Sir Eric Milbanke. And if you two gentlemen—Mr. Goss, is it, and Mr. Hagedorn?—will wait and keep this man in

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charge until the other passengers have debarked, the rest of you can leave promptly. I'm grateful to all of you for your help. There'll be reporters at the airport, of course, and you can do as you like about talking to them. But I must ask all of you not to leave until the police have entered and taken away the bodies of this unfortunate couple."

There was a murmur of assent.

"As for you—" he turned to Evans.

"I'm warning you, Captain. The Irish police can't touch me, and if you turn me over to them I'll make you and your company sorry you did. I can't fight my way out physically against these two big bullies, but—"

"That will be all, I think," said Kemper wearily. The sign went on to stop smoking and fasten seat belts.

The headlines in the *Dublin News* read:

Yank held for murder on plane
Lawyer shoots wife, paramour
Extradition asked

"It was just an idea I had," Sir Eric Milbanke said modestly to the reporters. "I wondered exactly what he'd told that private detective. It seemed reasonable to assume that the detective understood very well that his employer intended to commit murder. The police will probably find that even the pistol was his—Evans had no permit to carry one.

"The pilot sent a radiogram to his company in Canada; they telephoned the New York police, and the Homicide Department there quickly identified the private detective—we told them that Evans had been the detective's attorney five years ago in a divorce suit. The detective is under arrest now, and Evans will be put under lock and key in Dublin to await the extradition papers.

"Evans was too clever for his own good—that's the long and short of it. The murder itself was committed in one of the few places on earth where there is no jurisdiction whatever over crime, but—and here's the legal point that Evans, a lawyer, overlooked—the *original conspiracy* was perpetrated in the States. And they'll make that charge stick against both of them—conspiracy.

"I'd like to add that if it hadn't been for the cool thinking and courage of the pilot, a vicious murderer might well have escaped unscathed. The entire crew of the plane showed admirable calmness, and the passengers were exemplary in their conduct."

There was a little tug at his coat sleeve.

"Yes, young lady?" asked Sir Eric.

"If you don't mind," said Mavis, her hazel eyes wide and a pretty blush on her face, "would you kindly give me your autograph?"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **PAUL W. FAIRMAN**

TITLE: ***Recollection of the Future***

TYPE: Crime and Detection

DETECTIVES: Captain Damon and Dr. Masters

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The modus operandi of the murder was perfectly ordinary—yet the case itself was the most extraordinary that ever occurred in the 23rd Precinct . . .*

THE STREET WAS SCARCELY A block long, dead-ending against a factory wall as though it had tried to pierce the armor of the city's industrial section and had failed. It was called Garrett Place and it bore scars from its fight to remain residential: a sullen shoddiness, a hangdog look of neglect and failure.

The houses were old and tired; harsh brick fronts with sharply angled stairways leading directly from the sidewalk to high first floors. Ugly houses, built to last. . .

On the morning of the tragedy there was no indication that Garrett Place awaited violence. The sky was clear, the sun was warm, and old Mrs. Garneau scrubbed the worn bricks in her tiny courtyard as she had been scrubbing them for twenty-two years, while across the street, undershirted Joe Waller mouthed a shiftless greeting and sat down on his steps to read the paper.

The man who came to Garrett Place that morning was quiet and unobtrusive—in spite of his newly shined shoes, expensive black Homburg, and general air of well-bred prosperity. The kind of man who would never be noticed unless he insisted on it.

He came into Garrett Place with a marked reluctance, walking slowly, stopping in front of each house to

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study it thoroughly before passing on to the next.

Until he came to number 16—a brooding red-front with steep, green stairs and an old-fashioned, wrought iron hitching post at the curb in front of it.

Number 16 was apparently his objective, because he went no farther. But he did not climb the steps. Instead, he took a firm stance beside the hitching post, put his hands deep into the pockets of his topcoat, and waited.

A person standing in front of a house on Garrett Place could not long escape notice, and both Mrs. Garneau and Joe Waller were paying attention when the door to number 16 opened and a tall, thin, blond man came out.

The man did not appear to be either frightened or hostile. He waited a few moments and then called down from the porch, "Were you looking for someone?"

"I've been waiting for you."

"Won't you come up?"

"That will not be necessary."

"What can I do for you?"

There was no answer. The man stood silent for a few moments and then said, "I'm very sorry. I am not your enemy and I have nothing against you of a personal nature—nothing whatever. Believe me. I *am* sorry."

With that, he took a black automatic from his right-hand pocket and pointed it at the blond man and fired three times.

Mrs. Garneau screamed. Joe Waller dropped his paper and stared. The blond man's look of surprise at sight of the gun remained on his face even as the slugs ripped into him, even as he toppled down the green stairs.

It stayed with him until he died there on the sidewalk at the stranger's feet . . .

John Masters was in his office when the call came from Captain Damon. "Get over here as quick as you can," Damon said. "We've got a real prize package for you. All ready to unwrap."

"Man, woman, or unidentified?"

"Male Caucasian white. He just killed a citizen over on Garrett Place—a man named Barlow. He waited on the sidewalk in front of Barlow's house. Then when Barlow came out, this creep pumped three into him."

"Anybody hurt taking him?"

"Uh-uh. He did the killing in front of two witnesses. Then he wrapped the gun up in a cloth to save the prints and asked a witness to call the police."

"A novel twist. What was it—a grudge killing?"

"He claims he never saw Barlow before and didn't even know his name. All he'll tell us is that killing Barlow was vital to his peace of mind—that it had to be done."

"Was he acting for someone else?"

"I don't think so. I think you're right about the grudge angle."

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"With psycho overtones."

"Not by a damned sight! This bum's tight on his trolley. He's just clever: cutting the groundwork for an insanity plea—and I want it knocked out. You get over here and bust it quick, Doc. Nobody commits murder and gets away with it in my district—not even the brainy ones."

Masters said he'd hurry, but instead he remained at his desk. From the windows of his office he could see the distant spires of Park Drive in the better part of town, and he'd been pondering the fact that he could just as easily have been taking his calls there, in a swank office with all the rewards that accrue from serving the goldplated trade. Psychiatry could be made to pay a bucketful in this day and age if you worked it right.

But Masters had gone in other directions—into police stations, through slums, onto locked-off floors of mental hospitals—lured on by something one of his old professors had called selfless dedication, but which Masters chose to regard as stubborn curiosity. So he'd followed paths that led away from Park Drive, into areas rich in human suffering but sterile of any great material wealth.

Not that Masters had any regrets. He didn't consider himself particularly dedicated, nor was he much given to retrospection. He gave thought to the six-figure bank account only when his feet hurt and he wanted time to himself.

But his feet were rested now, so he put on his hat, reminded himself that he must have the windows washed soon, and headed for the Twenty-third Precinct police station.

The Twenty-third lay in a decent-enough section of the city, with comparatively few trouble spots for a district abutting an industrial area. Its crime statistics made good reading, kept well in the black by Captain Michael Damon, who held the reins of law and order in huge, extremely capable hands.

Masters found Damon in his office scowling at some papers. Damon said, "He's in the Interrogation Room. Take your time. I haven't booked him yet. If he yells for a lawyer, ignore it."

Masters said, "Application to duty will get you nowhere. Take a break and give me a cigar."

Contact with Damon always cheered him. Completely free from any taint of finesse or tact, honest as a granite cliff, Damon plowed straight down the middle, allowing no man to misinterpret his intentions or motives.

He poked an unbanded blunt at Masters and said, "A thug maybe I've got some respect for. He smacks a guy and runs and if you nail him he doesn't quibble. But the clever slobs—these we do a job on."

"Murder compounded by personal insult. That's going too far."

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"All I ask is that you bust up his insanity act before he gets it on the road."

"I'll see if I can unscrew his lid and count the convolutions. More than that, I can't promise."

"Do your damnedest."

Masters put the stogie into his pocket and went down the hall to a bare-walled room that had known much harshness and some violence. A uniformed policeman stood just inside the door and a well-dressed, middle-aged man sat quietly at a small table by the far wall.

Masters smiled at the policeman and said, "Hello, Kennedy," but with dismissal in his tone, and the policeman registered some reluctance before he left the room to take a post outside the door.

"Call if you need me. Those quiet ones—"

"I'll do that," Masters said and walked over and sat down at the table opposite the prisoner. "My name is John Masters. I'm a psychologist attached to the Police Department. I'd like to talk to you."

The prisoner did not answer immediately. His pause gave Masters time for scrutiny, but he saw nothing unusual: a healthy, unlined face with no marks of dissipation; firm, steady mouth, high forehead; black hair graying at the temples. All perfectly normal, except there was something in the eyes, something elusive—a suggestion of torment, as though they were habitually tensed for a blow. No, not quite that.

Something in the eyes all right, but it would take a little digging.

The man smiled now, a brief, humorless smile, and said, "Perhaps you'd like the statistics first. My name is Carl Horner. I'm fifty-three years old, unmarried, in good health—and I'm not insane."

"You're completely aware of the fact that you just shot a man to death?"

"I'm aware of it. They tell me his name was William Barlow. I'm sorry for the poor unfortunate. You see, he was on the verge of a breakdown and a murderous foray into the street with a loaded gun. So it wasn't a murder exactly—more of an execution before the fact."

"How did you know these things when you didn't even know the man's name?"

"That would take some explaining, and whether or not I go into it will depend pretty much on your attitude."

"*My* attitude?"

Horner leaned forward and rested his arms on the table. "Doctor, I know as much about psychology and psychiatry as you do—possibly more—because I've spent the last twenty years in study and research. I know exactly what you're thinking and what you're looking for in this preliminary examination. But you'll get none of the indicative reactions and responses. I could fake them very easily, but I have

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no intention of doing so. I am completely sane, and unless you feel quite convinced of that, there is no point in further discussions."

Doodling on a pad he found near his hand, Masters said, "That's a lot to ask under the circumstances—and on such brief contact."

"I'm not being arbitrary, believe me. It's just that if you're going to regard my statements as insane outbursts, they'll mean nothing to you and you might just as well use your time elsewhere."

"All right, let's say I'm curious, that I'd like to know the facts, and that I'll listen with an open mind."

Horner pondered this for a few moments while Masters tried to look deep into his eyes. Finally, Horner said, "That seems fair enough. Besides, I do wish to unburden. I'm a lonely man, Dr. Masters, and human enough to want a sympathy from you that isn't just a tool of your trade."

Masters forebore comment on that and said, "You told me you knew certain things about William Barlow that evidently were not common knowledge—"

Horner cut in. "Doctor, have you ever had any experience with precognition? The curse of knowing the structure of coming events prior to their enactment in this time cycle?"

Suddenly Masters felt let down and shamefaced. The man had actually got to him, intrigued him into forgetting his job. But from here out there wouldn't be much to it. Horner's structure would be wrecked by police work rather than psychiatric examination. Once they'd established the relationship between Horner and his victim—

Masters remembered his promise and said, "No, I've had no experience with precognition but I'm always open to whatever is available in any field. Are you telling me that you saw William Barlow go berserk in a vision?"

"It wasn't quite as simple as that. Let me give you a brief background."

"By all means," Masters said.

"I was thirty-five years old when it began," Horner said. "A friend drove me home from a bridge club we belonged to. It was well past midnight when he dropped me off and as I put my key in the door I saw him crash head-on into a truck without headlights. I envisioned the accident as taking place at an intersection nine miles from where I lived—a spot he couldn't possibly have reached in less than twenty minutes. I got a phone call from his wife an hour later. He'd been killed exactly as I'd foreseen."

Masters' mind wasn't necessarily closed to the unexplainable—only to Horner. The man had evidently done a great deal of research and knew his subject exhaustively. It would probably be difficult to trip him up. Masters said, "Just what form did this precognition take?

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Was it in the nature of a waking dream? Was it a vision superimposed over reality?"

Horner seemed suddenly older and wearier. "Mankind suffers from an inadequacy of language," he said. "There are no words to reflect certain feelings and emotions, let alone so-called phenomena beyond range of the understanding."

Neat sidestepping, Masters thought. Still, Damon would get his electrocution.

"I think, however," Horner went on, "that the mechanics of precognition, at least in my case, are totally mental; a recollection of the future, so to speak. I seem to see coming events in the same way that I remember an occurrence last week or last year. A certain envisioning is a part of it, but based on a previously formed mental picture."

No. Masters' mind was not closed to the unexplainable. He'd skirted it too often in his searchings to be complacent or blind to the vast reaches beyond human knowledge.

There had been times—low points—when he'd been forced to weigh his pitifully scant certainties against the infinite unknown and had formed a mental vision—a frustration symbol—of his own.

Nothing, of course, in the scope of what Horner was attempting to manufacture, but sometimes when he hit the stone wall, he saw a huge, grinning witch doctor somewhere out beyond the misty boundaries of mankind's furthest exploration; this witch doctor squatted over a tom-tom and whenever Masters made a fantastically wrong guess, he laughed and beat a mocking rhythm on the tom-tom and enjoyed it immensely.

Masters never mentioned his witch doctor to anyone. He was a little ashamed of it, even though he knew most people had personal visualized symbols.

But that was beside the case in point, and he turned his attention back to Horner's story.

". . . I hoped that the first few instances were—if not accidental—then forms of a phenomenon that would pass. But instead, precognition plagued me more and more."

Masters spoke lazily. "A little while ago you called it a curse, but it would seem to me there would be certain valuable compensations."

"Let me answer you this way. Some years ago I had two very close friends, a married couple with an eight-year-old daughter. The child died suddenly and terribly of polio. Can you find compensation in my having seen this death two months before it happened? In carrying this knowledge day after day until the tragedy arrived at the time and the place of its happening? Hardly, Dr. Masters. As a result of that occurrence and many others, I drew away from my friends, turned my back on all personal associations. I couldn't marry. I couldn't have children. It was out of the question."

In a way Masters felt sorry for

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Horner. His apparent sincerity indicated self-hypnosis. He had at least a superficial belief in his own fiction. A brilliant mind utterly wasted.

Masters said, "Are we up to date?"

"Almost. After I cut off all close contacts, the precognition changed in aspect. It became more general. I was made aware of events I had no personal interest in, always tragedies, always incidents of death and destruction—plane crashes, train wrecks, explosions—and in increasingly vivid detail until I was made aware of exact dates, meticulous detail, accurate casualty lists."

"And—?"

"And that brings us up to today's tragedy, Dr. Masters. The day before yesterday, I had precognition of an incident in Garrett Place, a location I happened to be familiar with from my wanderings about the city. I saw a tall, sandy-haired man come out of number sixteen. He had a gun in his hand; his eyes were those of a man insane; his incoherent cries, the voice of madness."

As Horner paused to light one of Masters' cigarettes, his fingers shook. Masters was enthralled by the performance.

"The man lunged down the stairs," Horner went on. "Halfway down, he fell, pitching on down to the sidewalk. He injured himself but it did not stop him. There was a police car across the street, and he fired the gun, hitting one of the two policemen who were standing beside it. I knew he had killed the policeman.

"The other policeman dived behind the car for protection and fired back at the man but did not hit him, and the man got to his feet and began dragging an injured leg down the street, firing as he went. He killed a man looking out a window and wounded a woman before the surviving policeman finally brought him down."

Masters made doodles on the pad. "Your vision was well detailed."

"Yes. I knew the date of the tragedy—today—and I also knew the exact time—four thirty this afternoon."

"And you're going to tell me you were trying to *prevent* your vision from becoming reality?"

"Exactly."

"Why didn't you talk to the police?"

Horner smiled wearily. "Do you honestly think they'd have believed me?"

"All right, but why didn't you wait? If you were determined to change destiny with your own hand, you could have gone there and waited—made sure—"

Masters stopped, wondering why he took the trouble to question Horner. The answers would be unimportant and nothing whatever would be gained.

Horner said, "I can only quote—or perhaps misquote—Macbeth. 'If

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it were done, then 'twere well it were done quickly.' I'm not brave, Dr. Masters. If I'd waited I might have lost my nerve."

"Did you ever try to change the outcome of your visions before?"

"No. That was the whole point. I'd always accepted them—submitted to the torture; but this time I had to strike back. It occurred to me that possibly destiny had expected that of me and that I'd failed. Then too, it was a way of writing my own end, Dr. Masters. I can't take any more. Believe me, I'm looking forward eagerly to the only possible verdict when my trial is finished . . ."

Masters got the end of it at four fifty-five when he got up and walked out into the station to stretch his muscles. They'd brought in an eyewitness to the second tragedy of that day in Garrett Place, a Mr. Parker.

The surviving policeman said, "Carson and I went up to check—to see if William Barlow's brother needed anything. This man Parker was there sitting with him and everything seemed all right. Then when we got back to the car we saw Barlow come out on the porch and—wham!"

Parker said, "I can't understand how he got up and walked after that fall. His right leg had been badly crippled since he was a child. He was Mr. William's twin, you know."

Captain Damon was pacing the floor. "Good Lord, has everybody gone nuts in that alley? Get out a detail! Search every house for maniacs!"

Mr. Parker was a mild man. He said, "They're all very nice people, really. You see, David depended on William for everything. A psychiatrist has been working on his persecution complex but I guess he just cracked up after William was murdered this morning. I'm very sorry about the policeman and Mr. Franklin across the street, but they say Mrs. Benson will live. That's a blessing at least."

John Masters turned and walked slowly toward the water cooler, while far out in the mists, beyond the boundaries of human knowledge, the witch doctor pounded his tom-tom.

Carl Horner laughed too, when they told him; a tense, keening monotone like a tight violin string trying to hold onto its sanity.

He kept on laughing until they had to do something about it; and after he'd been quieted, Masters shook his head sadly and told Captain Damon, "I wish he hadn't let go. Now any law student in town could keep him out of the chair."

"Not in my precinct," Damon growled.

"I'm afraid so, but you've got one consolation. He'll be just as disappointed as you are."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **STUART PALMER**

TITLE: ***The Return of Hildegarde Withers***

TYPE: Detective Novelet

DETECTIVE: Hildegarde Withers

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Welcome back, Hildegarde and Inspector Piper!—in a baffling case about the strange disappearance from Carnegie Hall of a Spanish dancing teacher . . .*

MISS HILDEGARDE WITHERS knew that something was afoot as soon as she came into the Inspector's outer office and saw that his door was closed. It was a chill wet December morning, and unwilling to go back into the drizzle or to interrupt one of her friend's official "conversations" with some unlucky suspect, the spinster schoolma'am sat down and proceeded to cool her sensible heels.

She pricked up her somewhat prominent ears as the sound of excited feminine voices came faintly through, and then the door opened and Inspector Oscar Piper ushered out of his office three attractively dressed young ladies who were strange visitors indeed for this center of the grimmest police activity. They were very young, alike as three peas in a pod except that the girl in the seal jacket was a little younger and prettier and more distraught than her companions, one in civet and one in squirrel.

"Last door at the end of the hall," the Inspector said to his departing guests, and then held the door for Miss Withers.

"Well, Oscar," Hildegarde observed tartly, eyeing a little mound of red-smeared cigarette ends in the midst of his cigar butts, "your clientele seems to be changing its tone."

The Inspector grinned sheepishly. "They got in here by accident.

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Some sort of a hysterical story about their dancing teacher disappearing up in Carnegie Hall last night. Seems this woman, name of Carla Monterey, popped off into thin air, leaving her clothes on a chair. She even left a hot shower running in the bath—to steam a velvet dress, so the kids say. I sent them up to the Bureau of Missing Persons."

"And just what good will that do?"

"Not much. The Sergeant will fill out a blue slip for the file."

"But Oscar—" There was a glint in Miss Withers' eye.

"Nothing in it for Homicide. We got rules, you know."

"*Have*, not got! Fiddlesticks! Rules are made to be broken. What's the rest of their story?"

A little nettled, Oscar Piper went on: "Just that they are all students in the school of this Monterey woman. Sometimes she books herself and her advanced pupils for professional engagements. Last night they were having a late rehearsal, which ended in some sort of row between the Monterey woman and her manager, an Argentine calling himself Emile Valentine. Valentine, yet! Anyway, this gaucho character and the girls went out for supper, and when some of them came back to pick up a handbag that had been forgotten, the dancing dame was gone. Studio's on the twelfth floor, and the elevator man said he hadn't taken her down. This morning she didn't answer her phone, so the girls really got worried and came down here. I figure it's just another case of artistic tantrums. Ten to one the woman will show up before the day is out."

"So she walked out and left a dress to steam," said Miss Withers thoughtfully. "You might have gone up there and looked around."

"I'm up to my ears. But if you're so all-fired interested—"

"I believe I will!" decided Miss Withers, rising suddenly. "School closed yesterday for the holidays, and I've had my Christmas shopping done since Labor Day—"

"Naturally!" said the Inspector, but she was already starting out of the door, umbrella grasped in a firm hand, looking like some ungainly bird of prey.

She was lucky enough to catch the three disconsolate maidens on the stairs. "The man says that a person isn't missing until after forty-eight hours!" the girl in civet complained to Miss Withers, after that lady had introduced herself as practically a member of the Force. "He says it's up to the immediate family to make a report, and that she'll probably show up all by herself."

"I can well imagine what *they* think," the schoolteacher said. "The official mind! Well, let's do a little sleuthing ourselves. And while we're in the taxi, let me hear all about it. Start at the beginning, go on until you come to the end, and then stop."

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"Said the Queen to Alice," spoke up the girl in sealskin, and the older woman beamed at her for recognizing the quotation. This one turned out to be Lucille Jeffers, and the others were Sally and Babs Dell. The name Lucille Jeffers meant little to Miss Withers, who did not follow the adventures of this year's debutantes in the society pages.

Lucille Jeffers, speaking a mixture of finishing school and slang, obligingly began at the beginning as the four rode northward from Centre Street. "We were all working our tails off at the studio last night, Sally and Babs and I and some others, rehearsing. The senorita had been teaching us the swellest Andalusian peasant dance—she had promised us a long while ago that if we caught on to it she'd let us do it with her as part of her professional act at hotels here during the holidays. But—"

"Everything was going *beautifully*," cut in squirrel-clad Sally, who spoke in breathless italics. "Until Mr. Valentine came *bursting* in about eleven—"

"With a telegram offering the senorita a chance to bring her group and make a New Year's Eve appearance at the Corals Hotel in Miami Beach," finished her sister Babs, a high soprano.

"I understand that started an argument?" Miss Withers pressed.

"Well, sort of," continued Lucille Jeffers. "Because without even asking her, he'd gone ahead and telegraphed an acceptance. Of course, all us girls are crazy to dance professionally. But most of us know darn well that our families won't let us go that far from home, and some of the others wouldn't give up their New Year's dates here in town."

"All but you, darling," cut in Babs Dell.

"All but me, because my mother's in Europe and my aunt doesn't care. Besides, I'm crazy to take that trip! Anyway, the senorita was furious with the girls because most of us wouldn't go, and furious with Valentine for getting carried away with the offer and wiring an okay. He wanted her to go alone, then, and just do the solos, or perhaps work just me into the act, but she wouldn't listen."

"And Valentine argued with her while we were changing back into our clothes, and we could hear them yelling at each other. So he left her there in her bathroom where she had the water running, and took us all out to eat."

"Carla usually has supper with us when we dance late," explained Lucille. "But last night she wouldn't come. So Valentine said good night to her and we all said good night and she just slammed the door."

"She didn't really slam the door. I think she just threw a shoe or something——," put in Sally.

"But after you ate, you did go back there?"

"Yes, because I'd left my purse,"

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Lucille Jeffers explained. "Emile went with me, because Carnegie is dark and scary that late. The studio door was locked, the lights were all on, and the water was still running in the shower where the dress was being steamed. But she was gone."

"You're sure she wasn't hiding somewhere in the studio?"

"Where could she hide? Emile and I went all through the place together, even looking into the closets. She hadn't taken the elevator, and she knows none of the other permanent tenants in the building, and I don't believe she'd walk down ten flights of stairs."

"What about windows?" demanded Miss Withers.

"They open out above the street, with no fire escapes. There's one from the bathroom onto an air shaft, but it's tiny." Lucille shook her head. "Her practice clothes were right there on the floor, and I think all her street dresses were in the closets, although I can't be sure because the place is so full of costumes. Anyway, it was well after midnight, so we turned off the water in the bathroom and put out the lights and Emile took me home. This morning we girls got together, and we decided maybe something dreadful had happened—"

"*Babs and I* were the ones who thought so!" corrected Sally.

"Well, I thought so too," insisted Lucille. "Only if Carla had wanted to go away for a little while, I couldn't help thinking how mad she'd be if we turned in a false alarm!"

"I feel it in my bones," said the schoolteacher, "that this is *not* a false alarm."

"You mean—you mean *suicide*?" Sally gasped.

The taxi drew up before the entrance to the studios of Carnegie Hall, one door east of the venerable portico beneath which three generations of music lovers had stood in line for symphony tickets. There was even a line there now, but the three girls and the inquisitive schoolteacher pushed past and made their way into the little raised foyer.

Here an ancient and solitary colored man dozed inside an ancient and solitary elevator. They entered, and it rose beneath them, haltingly and painfully, past one floor, then another . . . Miss Withers was somewhat surprised to notice that the sixth and eighth floors came on the same level, with the seventh above them!

"Buildin's powerful old," explained the venerable operator as he noted her surprise. "Levels sorta scrambled here, and easy to get yo'self lost in." The steel cage faltered to a stop, and Miss Withers followed the girls out on what she hoped was really the twelfth floor. Then she stopped to ask a question. "No, ma'am, ain't seen Miss Carla this mornin', nor hide nor hair."

They set off down a narrow hall, turned right, then left, then right

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again, went down three steps and came up seven, and arrived finally at a gateway and grille beyond which was a thick oak door bearing the sign: *Carla Monterey—Home of the Danse Espagnole.* Lucille fumbled for a moment in the maze of Moorish wroght iron, and withdrew a key. "She showed us where she keeps it," the girl explained as she unlocked the door.

Miss Withers found herself in a gaily tiled hallway, hung with shawls, ancient armor, and professional photographs. At one side was a mammoth Spanish writing desk, its drawers all awry. The air was thick and stuffy, as if all the windows had been closed for a long time. The girls called out, "Carla? Carla, you here?" But there was no answer.

Walking on tiptoe, the four females passed through the foyer and came into the wide expanse of the main practice hall, a long high room with a parquet floor, unfurnished except for practice bars along the wall and a battered victrola. At the right, doors opened into a smaller practice room and dressing rooms for the students. Directly across was a curtained doorway leading to the dancer's private apartment.

They came next to a livingroom, bright with scarves and shawls and Spanish art. It was also a bedroom, for against one wall was the bulk of an old-fashioned Murphy bed, the doors of two closets overflowing with costumes, shoes, and the like, as well as a small bathroom and a kitchenette bright with blue oilcloth. It was all hushed and silent as a tomb.

This was where the missing dancer had last been seen. Now only pictures of her remained—a great many pictures, some of them in the styles of yesteryear. From each wall Carla Monterey stared down, eyeing the intruders with the imperious scowling smile of the Spanish danseuse.

Miss Withers ignored the pictures and went at once to the bathroom, to study the velvet dress. It was of fine, plum-colored velvet but was sadly ripped at the seams. The window onto the air shaft, she discovered, was barely large enough to get her head through but she peered out of it and down, seeing nothing of importance.

Nowhere were there any indications of bloodshed or violence, although even at that moment the schoolteacher would have given odds that Carla Monterey was dead. Yet if the students and this Mr. Valentine had all left together, with Carla alive and in the midst of having a tantrum . . .

The girls, back in the studio, were chattering excitedly. There was no sign anywhere of the clothes that had been scattered around on the floor and on the chairs last night!

"Then she *has* come back!" cried Sally happily.

"Yes, of course she has!" Lucille

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agreed, in a voice totally without conviction.

Miss Withers was prowling about, apparently aimlessly. It seemed strange to her that there was not a single picture of a man anywhere in the place. "Was there no love interest?" she demanded. "*Cherchez l'homme*, you know."

"Not Miss Monterey!" said Babs loyally.

Lucille Jeffers started to say "No," but Sally interrupted. "Not since Emile!" she said firmly.

"*Since* Emile? But wasn't—isn't Mr. Valentine still around?"

"I guess they *used* to be lovers," Lucille said, with weary sophistication. "But they broke up months ago, and decided to be just friends. He stayed on as her manager, which isn't odd if you know show business."

Miss Withers looked thoughtful for a moment, then led the way back toward the entrance. In spite of her hunch, this case seemed to be falling to pieces. If only she could get her teeth into something!

The hall door suddenly opened, and a young and dapper gentleman stepped into the foyer, a key in his hand. He was well, almost exquisitely dressed, in a Chesterfield, pearl-gray Homburg, and spats. No, they were suede-topped shoes—but in Miss Withers' book that was just as bad.

"Oh, excuse me!" he said, his handsome face blank. "I didn't—"

"Oh, Emile!" cried Lucille. "Mr. Valentine—this is Miss Withers, *of the police*. She's going to help us find Carla."

"Of the police?" echoed the Argentinian. Then he smiled, showing beautiful teeth. It was a warm smile, and Miss Withers found herself changing her first impression of him. This was no gigolo, in spite of the long sideburns. He walked swiftly toward them, with hand outstretched.

But he was not trying to shake hands. "If you are of the police, madam," he said in a voice almost completely free of accent, "then it is right that you should see this." He extended an envelope. "I found this last night here in Carla's desk," he explained, "when Miss Jeffers and I were looking around. I opened it, naturally—though at the time I didn't feel like showing it to anybody." He gave Lucille Jeffers a pleading look.

To the police was written in a scrawling, childish hand across the envelope. *If anything happens to me, arrest Emile Valentine*, was the message inside. It was unsigned.

"That's Carla's writing, all right!" said Babs, looking over the schoolteacher's shoulder.

Miss Withers drew a deep breath. "Well, Mr. Valentine?"

He bowed with resignation. "I confess I toyed with the idea of destroying this. But do not credit me too highly for turning it in. Knowing Carla, I would guess that she left others around. She—she is a very peculiar woman." He sighed.

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Miss Withers put the letter in her handbag. She found herself far beyond her depth, and the three confused, frightened girls gave her no moral support. "I suppose you must arrest me?" the man asked her, almost cheerfully.

The schoolteacher shook her head. "I'm not exactly a policewoman," she confessed. "And I don't see any real evidence that a crime has been committed. Perhaps it is just that somebody, wanted to make it look that way!" She tapped her teeth with the handle of her umbrella. "It seems to me that we ought to be looking for Miss Monterey, here in the building."

"Why don't we ask at all the neighboring studios?" suggested Lucille Jeffers eagerly.

"And we shall," the schoolteacher pronounced. "I'll go to the right and you go to the left. Perhaps Babs and Sally will do the same on the floor above. See if Miss Monterey is there, or if they heard or noticed anything unusual last night."

"Could I perhaps help?" Mr. Valentine said hopefully. "I could take the floor below. After all, I have more reason than any of you to find Carla now!" And Miss Withers agreed with him.

The ringing of doorbells began in earnest. During the next fifteen minutes the schoolteacher managed to interrupt one class in adult tap dancing, four singing lessons, one luncheon party, and got an elderly male violin-teacher out of bed and out of temper. And everywhere she drew a blank. There was only one studio left, a studio entered from another hall but presumably abutting on the missing dancer's quarters. Here lived two maidens of seventy-odd, surrounded by potted plants and Siamese cats. It took Miss Withers almost no time at all to win the confidence of the kittens, and then of her hostesses.

She could hear, from where she sat on a sofa, a cacophony of piano lessons, voice culture, and stringed instruments through the thin walls, which gave her some hope. "Of course you ladies heard the commotion next door last night?" she fished.

"Why, we always go to bed about nine—"

"But you know how difficult it is to sleep as one gets older—"

Miss Withers sniffed, but let that go by. "What *did* you hear?"

"There was nothing unusual, except that about eleven—"

"Dear, it was nearer twelve!"

"Between eleven and twelve we heard the girls leave the dance place next door . . ." The old lady shook her head. "The Monterey studio, and if you ask me that woman is no better than she should be, with men calling at all hours, and—"

"There hasn't been a man there, at least not late at night, these last few weeks," corrected the other. "And if you ask me, it wasn't so quiet last night even after the girls

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and the man left. I could hear the Monterey woman playing castanets."

"It wasn't castanets, it was those Cuban gourds filled with shot—mariachis, I think they call them . . . or do I mean maracas?"

"You're both positive it was something, though?" The little old ladies were positive. The sounds hadn't lasted long, and then later someone had gone through the studio calling "Carla"—a girl and a man, they thought.

"We don't usually hear anything from in there," they agreed. "Just voices, and never clear enough so we can make out the words, really."

"Too bad isn't it?" said Miss Withers, and left in deep thought. For a moment the mystery had seemed to be clearing, and now she was faced with a fog even denser than before.

She returned to the dance studio, although there was something uncanny and unwholesome about it, something that made her feel like walking softly and speaking in a whisper. Perhaps that is why she opened the door silently when she entered.

Then she froze. Across the main hall the drapes of the studio doorway were open, the tall dressing-mirror outlining a distant but distinct picture. There was lovely Lucille Jeffers. As Miss Withers watched, the girl's coat slipped from her shoulders, revealing her slender body wrapped in a man's arms—the arms of Emile Valentine. Their lips met in an interminable kiss—a kiss obviously not meant to be seen by anybody else in the world—and Miss Withers backed hastily out into the hall and leaned against the grille.

So that was the secret she had sensed in the depths of Miss Lucille Jeffers' dark eyes!

The schoolteacher's meditations were shortly thereafter interrupted by Sally and Babs Dell, who announced clearly and loudly that they had discovered a violinist upstairs who had heard someone beating on a drum last night, around midnight. But that was the total of their findings.

With the two girls, Miss Withers went back into the studio, making sure to make plenty of noise. They found Lucille smoking a cigarette and curled up in a chair, while Valentine walked nervously up and down. Both announced that their searches had drawn a blank, which did not surprise the schoolma'am to any great degree. She looked at her watch, and found that the afternoon had slipped away. The Dell girls hinted that they were expected home, and that they had dates. They were obviously fed up with playing sleuth.

"Run along," Miss Withers told them. She reached for her bag and umbrella. Strangely enough, while she had purposely left them with the umbrella handle at right angles to the monogram on her bag, it

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now lay parallel! It was an old trick, one she had successfully used with her pupils, and she felt suddenly elated. She must be getting close, or someone would not have been interested in her bag!

She rode down in the elevator with the others, and in the lower hall stopped to scribble her phone number on a number of cards. "If any of you hears anything, please call me," she instructed them. "I have a strong notion that this evening will bring some word of Carla."

Lucille Jeffers gasped. "Then you don't think she's dead?"

"Yes and no," said the schoolteacher, and summoned a taxi. Once alone in the cab, she opened her handbag, but as she had guessed, the envelope marked *To the Police* was gone.

Across the table in their favorite spaghetti joint Miss Withers was consulting with her old friend and sparring-partner, the Inspector. Painstakingly, point by point, she gave him the developments in the case. "Of course, I haven't the *slightest* proof of foul play."

"You're always leaping to half-baked conclusions," said Oscar Piper. "I suppose you think this sheik Valentine lured her somewhere and bumped her off? But how? She was alive when they all left, and besides, where's the body?"

"Don't put words in my mouth, Oscar!"

He jammed his cigar into the ashtray. "They'd be superfluous. Wait! Suppose the Monterey dame took a runout powder down the stairs and left the note to throw suspicion on her former boy friend, hoping to get back at him? She could be hiding out—"

"But why? And you forget the sounds that came from the studio just after the others left her last night," the schoolteacher told him. "You forget the rips in the velvet dress, and the letter which Valentine produced and which someone snitched."

"Oh, that! I have a duplicate," the Inspector sprung on her. He showed her a long legal envelope, with a smaller one inside. "It came this afternoon. The law firm that sent it refused to talk. Same message as yours, only the Monterey woman signed this one."

She nodded. "Mr. Valentine was right, then."

"Perhaps you'd better let Homicide handle this, after all."

"Over my dead body!" Miss Withers had come to a decision. She wrote busily on the back of a memo for a moment, and handed it over.

Piper whistled. "Spanish dancer disappears," she had written. "Leaves poison pen letters attempting to implicate manager, but letters proved false by police investigation. Nation-wide search for Carla Monterey is on . . . You want me to try to plant this in the newspapers?"

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"My reasons should be obvious, even to your limited intelligence."

"Flattery will get you nowhere. There's barely time to get this into the morning rags, but I'll try. It's your funeral." And neither of the two oddly assorted partners guessed how close to truth that was to be . . .

Miss Withers went home, and waited for something to happen. Remembering the old story about the girl who had to take three baths on Saturday night before the phone would ring, she even tried that desperate experiment. Then she washed her hair, and gave it exactly one hundred strokes.

The early editions of the tabloid morning papers, she knew, came on the streets about 8:30 p.m., the *Herald-Trib* and *Times* somewhat later. The hands of the clock moved past ten, past ten thirty, past eleven . . .

The phone rang. And there was the suave voice of Mr. Valentine. "Madam, you are a genius," he announced. "You were right! I just received a message from Carla!"

"'O my prophetic soul!'" quoted the schoolteacher. "Where are you now, young man?"

He barely hesitated. "I—I'm at Miss Jeffers'. I simply had to tell her the good news and show her the telegram. It was filed at Miami Beach, Florida, and it reads: SORRY CAUSED WORRY WILL EXPLAIN EVERYTHING WHEN I SEE YOU AM GOING AHEAD WITH ENGAGEMENT HERE PLEASE FOLLOW AT ONCE WITH COSTUMES AND LUCILLE IF SHE CAN COME and it's signed CARLISSIMA, which used to be her pet name, so I know it is genuine."

"Well, are you going to follow her instructions?"

"Why not? I'm still her manager. And I expect almost anything of an artiste like Carla."

"Naturally," Miss Withers said. "All's well that ends well. May I speak to Lucille Jeffers, please?"

"Hello!" came Lucille's vibrant young contralto. "Isn't it wonderful? It all must have been just a silly joke!"

"Silly, but hardly a joke. Well, I hope you enjoy your trip to Florida."

"Why—how did you know I was going to go?"

"I didn't, until just now," said Miss Withers sagely. "Goodbye."

She hustled into her coat, and ten minutes later was climbing the steps of Carnegie Hall again. A different Negro was on elevator duty, and he took her up to the twelfth floor. It was late, very late, but Miss Withers had no mercy at all. She pounded on the door of the two little old ladies until they and their cats all came to the door to see if the building was on fire or something.

"I just wanted to ask you," the schoolteacher demanded, "did you ever hear a Spanish dancer playing castanets on the stage? Or see anybody playing mariachis or marimbas

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or whatever they call those things you shake?"

Both of them shook their heads. "I thought so!" Miss Withers said softly, and leaving them convinced of her utter madness, she went resolutely back down the hall, pausing only a moment at the Carla Monterey studio to make sure that the place was dark, the door locked, and the key gone. But she had enough, at least to sleep on.

When she woke bright and early next morning she knew that, except for one important detail, the puzzle had been completed by her subconscious while she slept. She knew what she must do, but first there remained the necessity of toast and orange juice and coffee. As calmly as if she faced nothing worse than her usual classroom of students, Hildegarde Withers prepared and ate a leisurely meal.

Then she strode southward through the crisp December morning toward Fifty-seventh Street and the ancient, grimy magnificence of Carnegie Hall. She rode up to the twelfth floor, walked down the hall to the dance studio, and knocked confidently on the door. Inside there sounded a cheerful male voice: "Just a second!"—and then the door opened and she looked into the surprised and disappointed face of Emile Valentine.

"Oh, it's *you!*" he said.

"And you were expecting someone else? Miss Jeffers, I presume?"

He nodded, mopping his sweaty face. "She promised to come down early and help me pack the costumes." He nodded toward the two great wardrobe trunks in the studio ahead of them. "I had the elevator man bring them up from the basement," he continued, "And the packing is about finished. But a man is never any good at this sort of thing."

"I certainly wouldn't trust any man I know to touch my clothes," Hildegarde admitted. "Perhaps I can help?" One trunk was closed, and the other stood gaping amid a litter of scarves, castanets, high-heeled slippers and brilliantly colored silks and satins.

"You're very kind, but I'm just about done," said Valentine. "Excuse my appearance, but it is a big job to pack forty costumes."

"What? Good heavens, how long is this Florida engagement to last?"

Valentine stared at her, as if he would very much like to ask why she had come, and why she was interested in other people's business. Then: "It's for New Year's Eve, and the dates before and after," he said slowly. "But the senorita is temperamental. She never decides until almost curtain time what fits her mood, so she usually takes her entire wardrobe along. Only this time, adding insult to injury, she leaves me to pack it."

He turned to stuff a wad of chiffon into a trunk drawer. Then, as Miss Withers prepared to ask the ques-

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tion that was foremost in her thoughts, he turned, his face a mask of puzzlement. "Tell me, as one who knows of detective matters, is there any way of making sure this telegram is not a hoax?"

Miss Withers found the wind blown from her sails. Slowly she took the message he offered her. It was a genuine Western Union form, she could see that. Strips of yellow paper from an automatic typewriter were pasted across the page. According to the data at the top, the message had been filed in Miami Beach at 10:15 last evening. It was just as it had been read to her over the phone. She scowled at it thoughtfully.

"I'd feel foolish if I carted the costumes all the way down there and found that Carla had skipped again," he said. "I tried to phone the hotel, but she isn't registered."

"The telegram certainly looks genuine," Miss Withers told him. "But young man, tell me something. Carla Monterey was prodigal with money, extravagant like most artists, was she not?"

He shook his head. "She was not! Carla appreciated the value of a dollar—anybody who knew her will tell you that."

"I see," said the schoolteacher. She roamed idly about the place as he continued packing. She fumbled with the telephone, straightened a picture, looked at herself in the tall mirror, and then sat down on the piano stool, sensing that the young man would very much like her to go but dared not suggest it.

He finished the second trunk, and slammed it shut. Then he looked impatiently at his watch.

"The girl seems to be late," suggested Miss Withers.

He nodded. Then he came over to the piano. "You're not really satisfied that the case is settled, are you?" he challenged. "What's on your mind? Is there anything I can do before the expressmen come for the trunks—they're due here at ten."

Miss Withers consulted her watch, and then told a bare-faced lie. "Why, it's almost ten thirty now!"

Valentine looked again at his watch, shook it, then listened to it. He turned toward the electric clock on the wall of the practice hall. Its hands pointed to twenty after ten; Miss Withers had seen to that detail.

"Got to phone!" cried Mr. Valentine. He hurried to the instrument, dialed furiously, and then emitted a string of soft Latin oaths. "The thing's dead!" he announced. "And we've got to make that noon train. I must call the express office, and that—that girl. Would you mind waiting here and watching things until I get back? If Lucille comes—"

"I wouldn't mind at all." Miss Withers gave him time to get to the elevator, and then began a survey of the place. To her surprise,

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the closets really *were* empty! The man actually had packed all forty costumes—which spoiled her hypothesis. She poked at the trunks, but they were both tightly locked.

Then heavy knocks came on the door, and the expressmen came in trundling heavy truck rollers. They seized the trunks before the agitated schoolteacher could make up her mind. "Okay, lady," said one. He shoved two tickets into her hand, and they departed, their rumbling slowly diminishing down the hall.

Things were going too fast for Miss Withers, and in the wrong directions. She made a circuit of the place again, noticing that the kitchenette door was open. The place looked cheerless, but perhaps that was because the bright oilcloth had been stripped from walls and dining alcove, leaving only rough bare boards. She came back into the foyer, with an eye on the phone. Suddenly the door opened.

Miss Withers whirled defensively, and looked into the youthful, worried face of Lucille Jeffers, dressed for traveling and carrying a suitcase in her hand. "What are you doing here?" the girl demanded. "What's happened? He *hasn't* left without me!"

"I think he just went to phone." Miss Withers was trembling with excitement, but she drew the girl in and closed the door. Then she ran across to the telephone, sliding her fingers along the cord to the point where a common pin had been inserted to short the connection (one of the little details she had attended to earlier) and removed it with a jerk. She lifted the receiver and was rewarded with a buzz. Hastily she dialed Spring 7-3100, while Lucille Jeffers waited with frightened eyes.

"Inspector Piper's office, and hurry!" she begged. Then—"Oscar! I'm in the studio at Carnegie Hall when I should be minding my own business. The fat is in the fire. Understand?" And she hung up, because Lucille was tugging at her sleeve.

"What's *happened?* What have you done to poor Emile?"

"That is beside the point. My dear, I've got to speak to you—"

"Speak nothing!" the girl exclaimed. "Haven't you eyes to see with? Don't you realize that this is all a frameup, a plot to incriminate Emile? She *hated* him, I tell you. She didn't want him and she didn't want anybody else to have him. If she's dead, she killed herself to make him suffer, and if she isn't dead, then she's in hiding and hoping he'll be arrested!"

"If that is true," said Miss Withers gently, "there's a way to prove it. Suppose we open those trunks in the other room?"

"The trunks? They should have gone already! But if you think there's anything in them that will incriminate Emile, I'll show you! I'll open them myself, with a hammer!"

Miss Withers said, "Then never

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mind the trunks. Your offer relieved my mind, though." Somehow she had known that a girl who still liked Alice in Wonderland couldn't be mixed up in murder. "We haven't a moment to lose, child. You've got to get out of here."

"Not without *him!*"

"But you must! Do you care for him so terribly?"

Lucille Jeffers' young body was stiff as a ramrod. "Of course I love him! In three weeks I won't need my parent's consent, and we're going to be married!"

"Child, you don't know what you're saying." Miss Withers was saddened, but she did not soften. "You mustn't run away to Florida or anywhere with this man," she said.

"I won't believe a word you say against Emile!"

"But if you go, that will only play into the hands of whoever plotted this diabolical thing," she pointed out. "If you travel across a state line with Mr. Valentine, even in separate Pullmans, he can be arrested for violation of the Mann Act, and thus be doubly framed!"

The girl fell for it, hook, line and sinker. "Would anybody actually *do* a thing like that?"

"You'd be surprised at what some people are capable of doing. Trust me, Lucille, and let's get out of here!" Taking the bewildered girl by the arm, Miss Withers hurried her out of the studio and down the hall. Her carefully laid plans were all going to pieces. But to get out of this place was the first step.

Her thumb pressed the elevator button, and she held it there until the machine started up. Somewhere on a lower floor it halted, and she thought she heard a man's voice. "Can't you hurry?" she called down. For a moment nothing happened, and then the cables started going by again. At last the door clanged open, and Miss Withers pushed the girl through, then followed as the man in the uniform cap slammed the door shut.

"Down!" gasped the schoolteacher, and as the car started to drop she saw the face of the man at the controls, and gave a little cry.

"Emile!" cried Lucille Jeffers. "Darling, what in the world—?" She tried to embrace him, but he flung her out of his way.

"Trick me, would you?" Valentine screamed at Miss Withers. "Well, I tricked you right back by getting rid of the old fool who runs this elevator. Now you're going for a ride—"

Suddenly there were shouts echoing up the shaft, and the sound of running footsteps on the stairs. "Oscar!" screamed Miss Withers. But Valentine stopped the elevator so suddenly that both women were thrown to the floor; then it shot upward again. The girl had succeeded in fainting in a heap in the corner; Miss Withers would like very much to have followed suit but somehow could not.

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The running footsteps mounted steadily below them, almost keeping pace with the antiquated elevator, which the frenzied man fought desperately, as if he wanted to take it through the roof. There was a command from below, and then a shot was fired, perhaps as a signal to those in the lobby. But Emile crouched down.

"*Agarde!*" he shrieked. "Hold your fire or I cut the women into bits and fling them down to you. Do you hear, coppers?"

The feet pounded steadily upward. And now Valentine had a knife in his hand. The car was nearly at the top of the shaft. Suddenly the man reversed it, and sent it hurtling down. Miss Withers had a glimpse of blue uniforms, of red angry faces shooting upward.

"I speak only with your leader," the man screamed, halting the car between two floors. "I bargain—my life for the two women. Is it yes?"

At the moment he was very much in command, though heaven knows he had no place to go. "Trapped in a trunk with a skunk!" Miss Withers whispered to herself, quoting the old singsong verse. But she could not take her eyes off the knife, which Valentine was brandishing wildly with his right hand while he ran the elevator with his left.

Then she heard a calm voice—perhaps the sweetest words she had ever heard in her life. It came strangely through the top grille of the cage, from somewhere up above—where a man peered down the shaft from an open door.

"Stoop a little lower, Hildegarde!" said Inspector Oscar Piper. In his hand—the first time she had ever seen him with firearms—was a police positive. As she flung herself down on the floor beside the limp figure of Lucille Jeffers, the gun spat—once.

Valentine collapsed slowly—and the weight of his body forced down the controls. The car shot down suddenly. It increased speed, plummeting. Miss Withers rose to her feet, pried Valentine off the lever, and as the daylight of the lobby came rising up beneath them, she cleared the mechanism and stopped the car dead-still.

She opened the door, still several feet above the landing, and then fainted dead away into the arms of her would-be rescuers.

"*Must* you drown me?" The schoolteacher received part of a glass of water in her open mouth, and prudently shut it again. The Inspector was leaning over her, looking concerned. Then she tried to rise, for she saw that she had been carried all the way back up to the dance studio.

"Take it easy," said Oscar Piper. "It's all over, whatever it was. But when you feel well enough, I wish you'd tell me what this is all about. You've been out for twenty minutes. I've sent a colored elevator man to Bellevue to have stitches

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taken in his scalp, I've sent a little girl over to Park Avenue with a broken heart, and a dead gaucho to the morgue. Suppose you fill me in on just what happened?"

Hildegarde sat up straight in her chair. "Of course it was Valentine who did away with the Monterey women," she began. "But I wasn't sure of it until this morning. Everything that happened only seemed to make it more confusing." She quickly outlined the high spots. "I didn't know until Lucille Jeffers was willing to open the trunks that she was innocent of any complicity. That completed my task."

"Okay, so I know what happened —but I don't know *why!*" said the Inspector. "Why did Valentine kill the dancer?"

"Because she loved him and wouldn't let him go. And he saw a chance to marry a pretty, rich deb. So he got rid of Carla. He did it in the studio, while the girls were dressing. Do you remember the girls said that after he came out of the room and called good night to Carla, she slammed the door?"

"Yeah, so she was alive then—"

"Oscar, there are portieres between the hall and the studio," she pointed out. "You can't slam a drapery. Anyway, Carla was dying then. While the handsome Argentinian took the girls out to supper, the woman who had loved him was strangling to death, *upside down!*"

"Hildegarde, you feeling all right?"

"They had a row, and he decided to kill her. Things played right into his hands. He tied and gagged Carla, and then turned on the shower to cover any noise she might make. The velvet dress was to explain the shower—but it was ripped so badly that I knew nobody would have bothered to steam the wrinkles out of it. It was a lucky break for him that Lucille Jeffers forgot her handbag, because that gave him an excuse to come back and make sure that everything was under control. But he couldn't let Lucille know, or even suspect. He wanted her to think that the disappearance was a phony, a frameup devised by Carla to injure him."

"And he thought he'd *clear* himself by producing the letter?"

"Yes. Carla had probably been threatened by him before, and showed him the letters. He knew there'd be others, so he beat us to it. Then the two little old ladies telling of the noise they'd heard. Each one picked a different cause for it—castanets, or maracas, and someone upstairs thought he'd heard the beating of a drum! But I'll come to that point later.

"It was Lucille Jeffers who took that letter from my handbag, thinking to protect him. That convinced me that she loved him, but was not entirely in his confidence. So I set a trap, or rather I had you set one for me. I mean the an-

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nouncement in the papers that the police took no stock in the poison pen letters. That gave Valentine confidence and a new idea. In his attempt to make the case seem like a hoax, it occurred to him that if he received a wire from Carla in Florida, the investigation would probably be dropped. The suggestion was that she had seen the New York papers, realized that her plot had failed, and decided to call it off."

"But you can't get New York papers in Florida as soon as they're off the press."

"Exactly, Oscar! I knew the wire was a fake, if only because it so conveniently offered Mr. Valentine an excuse to get out of town and take the girl with him. Heaven only knows what he expected to tell Lucille when they got to Florida."

"But you yourself saw the wire, filed in Miami Beach!"

"Remember, Valentine had received an earlier telegram, offering the dance engagement. He simply went out and sent himself a message signed Carla, and then soaked off the typed matter and pasted the fake date and message on the genuine base!" She paused for breath. "Of course he was mad as a hatter—I think most murderers are. But he was clever. He almost convinced me that Carla, who was careful about money, was in the habit of paying excess fare on trunks containing forty dance costumes—for a three-night performance!"

"But the costumes *are* gone!" objected the Inspector. "Why should he send them anyway?"

"Get me some fishhooks and line, and I'll find them for you," the schoolteacher said.

"Huh? Oh, there's a regular grappling iron in the car downstairs," Piper told her. "But it's not heavy enough to lift a dead body up an airshaft."

"But there's *nobody* down the airshaft!" she told him. "Just the forty costumes, or most of them anyway, if I'm not mistaken."

"Then—then where *is* the body of Carla Monterey?"

She handed him the two red baggage checks. "You can pick up the trunks at the station," she said. "You'll find Carla in one of them, wrapped up in blue oilcloth."

The Inspector ran for the phone, returning almost instantly. "I've started the boys," he said. "And I've also found out the real motive of this murder. They discovered at the morgue that Valentine is really a bigamist and wife murderer named Ramez, wanted in all the Americas. Suppose the Monterey woman threatened to tell the Jeffers girl of his past?"

"Brilliant, Oscar. Now that you have it all figured out, I think I'll trot along home—"

"No, you don't! Where did he hide the body until he was ready to put it into the trunk?"

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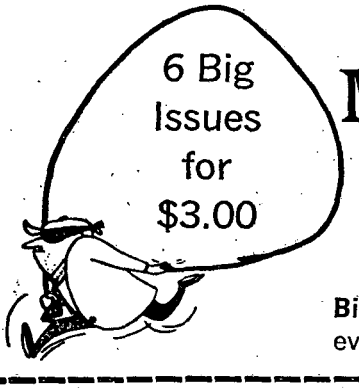
"Elementary," said Miss Withers. "Step this way, Oscar." The schoolteacher led the way back into the studio living room. "Why, of course—he left her right where she died. In this thing!"

She tugged at the Murphy bed, and finally it swung down to the floor. The Inspector gasped. "Good Lord! You mean he hid the body *in* the bed?"

"Still alive—alive and kicking, I would say. Head down in a tangle of bedclothes. Strangling brings muscular spasms, and that accounts for the noises, the 'slammed door' that the girls thought they heard, and the 'castanets' and 'drum playing' and all the rest of it. They heard Carla Monterey's *last* dance—her feet rattling against the door in a true Danse Macabre!"

"Let's get *out* of here!" said Inspector Oscar Piper.



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **RICHARD O. LEWIS**

TITLE: ***The Importance of Sawing Wood***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A terrifying peek into the life of an accountant at the Welton Bank & Trust, and of his wife and mother-in-law—and what you see you won't forget . . .*

THE FOOTSTEPS IN THE HALLWAY paused in front of the door to my little room. Then the door swung inward, and the two big men entered, scowling darkly as usual.

"Come along," one of them said to me.

I got up from the bed where I had been sitting and stood beside it for a moment.

"Come along," the man said again. He came toward me, took hold of my arm, and began shoving me roughly toward the door. The other man took hold of my other arm, and they took me through the door and down the hallway—a combined force of 450 pounds of manpower propelling my slight 140.

But I didn't mind, and a minute or two later I was pushed through another door into Mr. Bisselworth's office.

"Well, Robert!" Mr. Bisselworth said by way of greeting. "Come in, come in,"—as if I had any other choice. He was tall and gangly. Thick-lensed glasses made his protruding eyes seem even more bulbous, and the horse teeth in his wide mouth were displaying their usual splendor. One of them had a gold filling along one side. "Have a cigarette?"

I approached his big desk, took a cigarette from the proffered box, and began fumbling for a match. But I didn't have any, and his smile was making me nervous.

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"Here, my good man!" he said jovially, and extended his lighter. "Now sit down in the chair there and just make yourself comfortable."

I did. Mr. Bisselworth sat down in his chair behind the desk, leaned back informally, and blew a thin wisp of smoke companionably upward to the dark and distant ceiling.

The next moment he wheeled about to face me across the desk and let me bask in the radiance of his wondrous but nerve-wracking smile. "And now, Robert," he said, "what do you say we just sit here and have a nice friendly little chat?"

"Yes, sir," I said. I knew what was coming. He wanted to hear my story. But I didn't mind going through it again even if his smile was beginning to make my hand tremble a little.

"Let's see," he said thoughtfully, as if he hadn't already made up his mind exactly where to begin. "Let's start with what happened a year ago —when you bought the new house."

"Well, it wasn't exactly a *new* house," I explained. "It was really an *old* house at the edge of town. It had a large yard with two sheds in back, and there was a big basement—"

"You were happy there?"

I could never quite find an answer for that one. Maybe it was because I didn't know precisely what the word "happiness" meant. I didn't go around yelling whee and hooray all the time, but I was alive, had fair health, and—well, I guess I was just about the same as most other people. "I liked it there," I said. "It was a nice house. And there was this big basement—"

"We'll come to the basement later," said Mr. Bisselworth. "You had no financial worries?"

"I had a good job—I was one of the accountants at the Welton Bank and Trust. Of course, I was making payments on the house, and my wife was having some remodeling done."

"And you didn't want the house remodeled?"

"I liked it the way it was. That's why I bought it. But she wanted to have the sheds in back torn down and have the yard landscaped. And she wanted to put in an automatic heating unit and get rid of the old furnace in the basement."

"You quarreled about it?"

"No, not exactly. She went ahead and had the oil heating unit installed, but I wouldn't let the men tear down the sheds or remove the old furnace. I was adamant about that! I wanted some of the things left just as they were!"

"I see." Mr. Bisselworth grew thoughtful again, and he looked much better when he wasn't trying to smile. I felt better, too. "Your marital relationship. Was it—well, ah . . ." He coughed and knocked the ash from his cigarette into the ash-tray. "Was it—well, would you say you were compatibly married?"

"Well, I suppose so. Of course, I had no way of comparing our

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married life with that of others who had been married for twenty years, things like that being of a rather private and personal nature, you know. She did show a measure of warmth toward me—occasionally—but she was of a retiring nature and liked to visit with her mother quite often. Her parents lived in Stockton, about two hundred miles away, and she would go there and stay for two or three weeks at a time."

"You didn't mind being left alone that long?"

"No, not a bit. I got rather used to it through the years, and after we moved to the new place I rather enjoyed it. I liked to rummage through the sheds in the back yard, and one of them was nearly full of poles and small logs. I guess the people who lived there before us used wood in the furnace. And sometimes I'd carry an armful of logs to the basement and saw them up for firewood. It reminded me of when I was a boy on the farm. My father wouldn't let me do the heavy work, but he would let me saw wood whenever I wanted to. And sometimes I'd saw for hours, and he'd compliment me on how much wood I'd—"

Mr. Bisselworth cleared his throat. "And how about friends? Did you have any friends? People you met with socially, I mean."

"Oh, yes. Friends would drop in for an evening every week or so. And we would drop in on them once in a while. And when my wife would go to a club meeting or the P.T.A. or something, I'd invite some of the boys in for an evening of cards. And sometimes when their wives were out, they'd invite me in."

Mr. Bisselworth crushed out his cigarette in the ash-tray and then held it across the desk for mine. "Your life, then, was what we might call—more or less—a normal one?"

I nodded.

Mr. Bisselworth lit another cigarette for himself, but he didn't offer me one. I guess it was because when my hand got to shaking while I was smoking the last one I spilled ashes on the rug.

"Then your wife's father died," he said.

"Yes. His name was Joseph Ritter, and he was a good man. He was rather easy-going—like myself, sir—and I felt kind of sorry about his passing on. He never did get very far in life. I mean, he never made much money, never seemed to have much enthusiasm for whatever work he might be doing. He seemed weary all the time, and one day he just sat down in his chair and died."

"And then Mrs. Ritter came to live with you?"

"Yes. Joseph didn't leave her much of an estate to speak of, and she didn't have anything to go on with, and no one to turn to except her only child, my wife. So she came to live with us."

"You didn't mind your mother-in-law's coming to live with you?"

"No, not a bit. She had no place

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else to go, and I felt kind of sorry for her. She took Joseph's death very hard, and after she arrived at our house, she cried and cried for days, weeks really. She would even waken in the middle of the night and begin crying. Finally, she moved into our bedroom where my wife could comfort her, and I moved into the spare room. She wore black all the time—in mourning, you know—and my wife began to wear black, too, out of respect and sympathy. And Mrs. Ritter made me a black armband to wear to the bank."

"You didn't mind wearing the armband?"

"No. It was all right—except for the effect it had on the other people in the bank. They'd be laughing and talking, and then when I'd come up to them and they'd see the armband, they'd quit laughing and begin looking at me with deep sympathy. And whenever they'd talk to me, it would be in hushed tones. It was like being in a funeral parlor wherever I went. Finally, I began taking the band off my arm and putting it in my pocket just before reaching the bank and not putting it back on again until I left."

"And when you came home after work—?"

"Dinner was always a rather solemn affair. We generally ate in silence except for Mrs. Ritter who would sigh once in a while and say how nice it would be if only poor Joseph could be eating with us. Afterwards, she would sit on the davenport and sob, and my wife would sit beside her and hold her hand and listen to her tell all about how happy she had been in her very own home with her very own husband. And, of course, she didn't want us to turn on the television or the radio or anything like that because she said it just wouldn't seem right for us to be sitting around enjoying ourselves with poor Joseph in his grave and all."

"Then your evenings were—ah—well, rather dull, shall we say?"

"Worse than that, sir—they were utterly depressing. There just wasn't anything to do. Some friends dropped in once, but after spending the entire evening listening to Mrs. Ritter telling what wonderful times she and poor Joseph had had together, how they had visited the Yellowstone National Park, and how she had once baked a birthday cake for him—well, they didn't come back any more. And we couldn't go out to visit our friends, of course, and I couldn't have the boys in for cards, and the boys didn't invite me to their games any more—"

"And that's when you began spending your evenings in the basement, sawing wood?"

"No, not right away. You see, one night after sitting for an hour and hearing nothing but sobs and sighs coming from the direction of the davenport, I went out and got drunk. Yes, sir, I'm sorry to admit it, but I got drunk. After that,

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neither of them spoke to me for two weeks. They would just sit and stare at me—sad-like—as if I had committed some terrible crime, such as desecrating the memory of poor Joseph forever. It was sometime during those two weeks of silence that I began going down to the basement and sawing wood. You see, I *had* to saw wood . . . or . . ."

"I see." Mr. Bisselworth crushed out the stub of his second cigarette. "Perhaps it would have been better," he suggested, "if you had taken up some hobby or sport. Golf, for instance."

I thought Mr. Bisselworth must be joking. But he wasn't. He meant it. "With all due respect, sir," I said, a note of agitation creeping into my voice, "anyone who would hit a ball with a club, then go chasing after it and hit it again and again and finally knock it into a little hole—anyone who would do a thing like that is crazy! If you wanted to get the ball into the little hole, all you have to do is to carry the ball over and drop it into the little hole."

"Now, now," said Mr. Bisselworth, his great friendly smile once more breaking out around his big teeth. "There, there, Robert."

"You see, there's something *final* about sawing wood," I explained. His smile was making me nervous again, and my hands were beginning to tremble. "When you saw a piece off the end of a log, why there it is! It's done! You can't put it back on again! There is a sense of accomplishment, sir. You can take the piece and pile it on other pieces. Or you can put it into the furnace and it will give off heat for the house. It's certainly more important than putting a golf ball into eighteen different little holes."

"But you didn't need to put wood into the furnace," said Mr. Bisselworth. "You had the automatic oil unit."

I didn't bother to explain to him that you couldn't very well put stove wood into an oil burner. Anyway, he was acting just like *they* had—couldn't see the importance of sawing wood. I remembered how they would stare at me—strange-like—when I came up from the basement after an evening of sawing and how Mrs. Ritter would whisper to my wife—loud enough for me to hear—how poor Joseph would never have wasted his time sawing wood every night.

I guess Mr. Bisselworth thought I wasn't going to talk any more because, after a while, he asked me another question to get me started again. "And so you went to the basement and sawed wood every night?"

"No, not every night," I said. "Once when I went down to the basement I couldn't find my saw. After looking for it every place I could think of, I realized they had hid it or had disposed of it in some manner. And so I couldn't saw wood that night. I just sat there on the

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woodpile till bedtime. Then, next morning, I bought a new saw and began carrying it with me wherever I went."

"You mean you carried it to work with you—to the bank?"

"Oh, I wrapped it up real good in a piece of paper so no one would know what I was carrying under my arm, and I would put it under my desk at the bank until it was time to go home. You see, I was afraid to leave it out of my sight for fear they would steal it like they did the first one. And then there was one night when they locked the basement door—"

"So you didn't get to saw wood that night either?"

"Oh, the lock didn't stop me. You see, I had my new saw right with me, and so I knocked a panel out of the door, unwrapped my saw, and sawed out that part of the door that had the lock on it. After that, they couldn't lock the door any more, and I got to saw wood every night."

"And how long did this go on? I mean, how many nights did you go down and saw wood before . . .?"

"I don't really know," I said. "I began to lose track of time. But it must have been quite a while because I remember one night—just before I started to the basement to continue my work—I heard Mrs. Ritter tell my wife that she didn't think that, after all, six months was long enough to mourn poor Joseph's passing, and that maybe she'd feel better about it if she extended the mourning period to a full year. And it was shortly after that when the wood began staring at me."

"The wood began staring at you?" Mr. Bisselworth's smile had faded a bit, and his big teeth were almost hidden from view. That made me feel a little better.

"The very first piece I sawed off that night fell to the floor with a clunk, rolled over, and began staring at me. It had sad red eyes, and it stared at me just the way Mrs. Ritter always stared at me—as if I had done something wrong, something that was disturbing poor Joseph's rest. I picked it up and was going to put it on the pile when I realized that if I did, it would just sit there staring at me. So I tossed it into the furnace to get it out of my sight.

"Well, the next piece stared at me just the way my wife was always doing, and so I had to chuck that one into the furnace, too. After that, every piece I sawed stared at me just the way one or the other of *them* was always staring at me, and I had to keep throwing them into the furnace one after the other as fast as I would saw them. To keep them from staring at me, you understand."

Mr. Bisselworth was trying to light another cigarette, but he seemed to be having trouble holding the lighter steady.

"And it was the same way night

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after night," I went on. "As soon as I would saw the pieces, they would begin staring at me, and I would have to throw them into the furnace. There just wasn't anything else for me to do. You see that, don't you? I couldn't let them pile up. And I couldn't be upstairs and have the two of them staring at me and then go down to the basement and have a whole woodpile of them staring at me. And I had to keep the fire going in the furnace full blast to keep it from being filled up with wood. I hope you understand, sir."

Mr. Bisselworth had given up on lighting the cigarette, and his smile had vanished completely. I felt almost like my old self again. "It must have gotten frightfully hot," he said, wiggling his long neck in his collar.

"It did, indeed, sir," I admitted. "They kept all the windows and doors open upstairs every evening while I was sawing, and quite often they would call down through the hole in the door and tell me to quit. But I couldn't quit. You see, I had to saw the wood, and I had to throw it into the furnace to keep it from staring at me. And then, one night when I was really working at my best, at top speed, they both came down and tried to stop me. And when I wouldn't stop, they just stood and stared at me—exactly the way the wood stared at me. I told them to go away, but they just stood there and stared. And then I knew exactly what I had to do. To keep them from staring at me, I mean. I didn't want to do it, but there wasn't anything else I could do. And so, after tying them up with ropes, I took hold of my wife and—"

Mr. Bisselworth said something I couldn't quite hear and twisted his neck some more. "And so," he said, as if something were choking him, "you took your wife to that saw thing—"

"Sawbuck," I corrected; "or sawhorse."

"—sawbuck or sawhorse and held her squirming body there while you—"

"Oh, no, sir!" I broke in. "I couldn't do a thing like that, sir! I knocked her on the head with a thin log first, and *then* I began—"

"And, Mrs. Ritter?" His smile had returned. Well, it wasn't exactly a smile; his lips were merely skinned back to let his big teeth stick out as if they were about ready to drop out of his face; and his eyes were bugging a bit more than usual.

"Oh, I put a gag on her mouth, tied her to a chair, and just let her sit there. That was Saturday night. I knew how well she liked to mourn, and so I let her sit there all night and all day Sunday. Then I got my saw and untied her—"

"And—and you knocked her on the head?"

"Oh, no, sir. I didn't have to. As soon as I untied her, she fainted dead away. And so I didn't go to work Monday. I had to saw wood. You see, I needed a lot of wood! And

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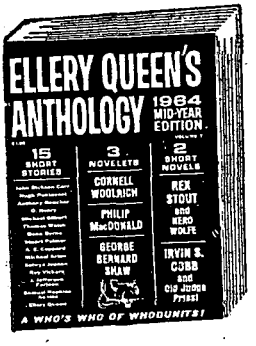
so I sawed and sawed and sawed—"

Mr. Bisselworth's bugging eyes were staring at me, and his crazy grin was bothering me again. I was getting nervous and beginning to tremble all over when the two men got hold of me again, one on either side, and pushed me out the door and down the hallway and into my room and locked the door.

But I didn't mind. It's quite nice here in the Haven of Rest Home, and they let me scribble things down on paper in my room, and, when I get too restless, they let me go out in the yard and saw wood.

They let me saw wood as long as I want to, and sometimes Mr. Bisselworth comes out and stands near me and watches me saw wood. But I wish he wouldn't, because last night one of the pieces I sawed off rolled over and its horse teeth began grinning up at me . . .



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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

Mystery Writers of America have given their Edgar for best novel of the year to Eric Ambler's fine comedy, THE LIGHT OF DAY (Knopf, $3.95), which also received an award last year from England's Crime Writers' Association. Among scroll-honored runners-up was Ellery Queen's THE PLAYER ON THE OTHER SIDE (Random, $3.95). *Best American first novel:* Cornelius Hirschberg's FLORENTINE FINISH (Harper & Row, $3.95). *Best short story:* Leslie Ann Brownrigg's "Man Gehorcht" (*Story*, Jan.-Feb.) with a scroll to Stanley Ellin's "The Crime of Ezechiele Coen" (EQMM, Nov.).

★★★★ **THE VOICE ON THE TELEPHONE, *by Mildred Davis*** (Random, $3.95)
Fine study in character and emotion combined with beautiful plotting, by a too infrequent master of suspense.

★★★★ **THE MISTY CURTAIN, *by Lucy Cores*** (Harper & Row, $3.95)
Fresh and delightful suspense story of youth, love and the theater, with unusually adroit integration of psychoanalytic material.

★★★ **TREAD SOFTLY, *by Frances Rickett*** (Simon & Schuster, $3.50)
Rickett's first, THE PROWLER (Simon & Schuster, $3.50), deservedly won an MWA scroll; this sensitive study in adolescence is even better.

★★★ **THE MURDERING KIND, *by Gwendoline Butler*** (Roy, $2.95)
Curiously indirect yet wholly absorbing story of terror at the bright seaside, by a strikingly individual author.

★★★ **THE SHORTEST ROAD TO PARADISE, *by David Ward*** (Horizon, $4.95)
Excellent full-length biography of Charles Peace (1832–77), one of the most colorful and representative criminals of the Victorian era.

★★★ **TRIO FOR BLUNT INSTRUMENTS, *by Rex Stout*** (Viking, $3.50)
Models of craftsmanship, including the best Nero Wolfe novelet in years, "Blood Will Tell" (EQMM, Dec. 1963).

More MWA: *Best fact-crime:* Gerold Frank's THE DEED (Simon & Schuster, $4.95). *Special awards:* Philip Durham's study of Chandler, DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS A MAN MUST GO (U. of N. Carolina, $5) and Hans Stefan Santesson's reviews in *The Saint Mystery Magazine*. *Grand Master:* George Harmon Coxe.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 265th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . This "first story" has a rather unusual history. It was written about 15 years ago, put aside by the author—and forgotten! Early in 1963 the author was cleaning out some old papers in his desk when he came upon the manuscript. On rereading it, Mr. Menkes has informed us, he had the strange sensation that he had not written the story—at least, he did not remember having written it, although it seemed vaguely familiar.

Now, Mr. Menkes has been (to quote from his letter) "a devotee of Ellery Queen, both in novels and in the mystery magazine, ever since the beginning." So he was aware of EQ's special interest in "first stories." Would EQMM be interested in a "first story" written in 1948? There was only one way to find out . . .

But how was it possible for Mr. Menkes to forget his own story so completely? Well, Mr. Menkes has always been an extraordinarily busy man—a man who wears many hats—or, as he himself phrased it, he has a great many professional interests which keep him on the run. He is, among other things, a Professor of Mechanical Engineering at the City College of New York; he is a Councilman (an elective office) in the Township of Teaneck, New Jersey (population: 42,000); and these alone are active, time-consuming pursuits . . .

THE WAITING ROOM

by SHERWOOD BRADFORD MENKES

I AM A DEAD MAN. THAT'S RIGHT, *take another look. I don't imagine you thought you'd ever read a story written by a dead man, did you? But I am as dead as a man can be, and here you are reading all about it . . .*

That's how it started—the story, I mean. I remember the day well. It was in the latter part of January, last year—one of those bleak, gaunt, forbidding days. At that time I was living in a small brownstone in the eighties, fairly close to the Hudson River. The wind that morning was raw and biting, and the cold damp air crept in round the edges of the windows, caressing my bones with icy fingers.

Wearily I thrust off the covers and stuck my feet into the shabby

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slippers by the bed. Rubbing my unshaven face a trifle ruefully, I brushed the tousled hair from my eyes and struggled into the bathroom. After washing and shaving, I began to feel a little more wide-awake and wandered into the kitchen to make a quick cup of coffee. I happened to glance at the bridge table set up in the corner, on which my typewriter stood, and which served as my working quarters.

Writing is a difficult profession; I have tried to approach it in an orderly fashion, by introducing system in neatly stacking paper and manuscript in their proper places, and by keeping regular work hours. But today there was something wrong. Apparently the wind had blown papers all about, and there was tremendous confusion. The papers were everywhere—on the floor, on the chair, even strewn over the typewriter. Picking some of them up and trying to straighten them out, I idly glanced at one of the pages and happened to catch the paragraph I've quoted. The manuscript read:

I am a dead man. That's right, take another look. I don't imagine you thought you'd ever read a story written by a dead man, did you? But I am as dead as a man can be, and here you are reading all about it.

I know all about you, you see, and you know nothing of me. But I have to tell someone, and someone must help me to rest easy. It is very cold and very wet down in the river. Yes, that's where I am now—that's where I've been for a long time. And there's no one to talk to—at least, hardly ever, and then only for a short while.

My name is John Skinner. I first got into the river seven years ago, on April 9, 1941. Of course, I didn't want to go down into the river. If I had, I wouldn't have to stay here now. There's a special place for people who jump into rivers of their own accord. That may seem silly to you, but people who are driven to end their own lives have suffered enough on earth, and so there is a nice restful place for them to go. It's a sort of Waiting Room, where they can get together until permanent accommodations are arranged.

There is such a long waiting list because reservations are made when all these things are first figured out—oh, about 100 years before the accommodations are needed. So when something unexpected happens, there is no place to go. My place won't be ready, they tell me, for another twenty-two years. Disease, and things like that, are planned on; but when a human goes off his control beam, and murders another, that's not figured on. That kind of thing isn't supposed to happen.

I've been down in this dark river for seven years now—that's an awfully long time. And it's so wet and so cold. The rule is, we have to stay

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here until our regular time comes around. It's hard on us, but there are so few of us, and so many of the others. When somebody is passing through to the Waiting Room—like a suicide—I get a chance to talk to them for a day or so, until their papers are cleared. Generally, they are rather hard to talk to, though—there has always been so much sadness in their lives. Then I tell them about the nice warm Waiting Room they are going to, and they brighten up. But they never stay very long.

There was another chap down here for about a year when I first got below. But luckily for him, he was supposed to have died rather young anyhow, from a heart attack, and so he didn't have too long to wait. But he was pushed in, just like me. In his case, it was his wife who did the pushing. It didn't much matter to him; he was tired of living with her anyhow. He was pretty good company—knew a lot of stories—and we spent many pleasant hours trading them back and forth. But he left six years ago, and I have been pretty much alone since then.

I suppose you're wondering why and how I managed to get this onto your typewriter. I'll tell you the why a little later; the how is a bit of a secret, because we're not supposed to do this sort of thing. But I just couldn't stand it any longer. I have to tell someone, and make some better arrangements for myself—I just have to!

It was a fellow named Charlie Cavalone who pushed me into the river. Charlie lives near you, on 87th and Broadway. We had a fight about a dame. Her name was Louise, and she died last year of t.b., out west. She doesn't matter much now any more, but then she mattered a whole lot.

Louise was little and dark, and she had a trick of looking up at you out of the corners of her eyes. And she had the best little figure you ever saw. She played the field, but neither Charlie nor I knew about that. She was stringing him and she was stringing me, and both of us thought we had the inside track.

And she could get away with it, too. All she had to do was push a button and we all jumped—especially Charlie and me. She did some singing and dancing at Charlie's place downtown—The Blue Bottle. And she had us all crazy for her—but especially me and Charlie.

I used to go down to the club all the time. I couldn't take my eyes off her, and when she would sing one of those soft numbers with a lot of throbbing in it, all the men would be hypnotized in their seats. About twice a week I would take her home after the show.

This one time, Charlie must have been all hopped up, and he followed us. I took her in, and upstairs, and when I came down a couple of hours later—it must have been about 4:30 in the morning—Charlie was still waiting outside. Nobody else was around, and he grabbed me by

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the arm, cursing me under his breath.

He was crazy-mad by that time. You stay away from her, he yelled, and socked me across the side of my mouth. He was a big guy, and a lot of people thought he was all fat. But he was plenty strong. He hit me again, on the back of the neck. Maybe he hit me harder than he meant to; anyway, he knocked me down and my head crashed against the stone railing. I died almost immediately.

Charlie got a little scared then. He lifted me up and put me in the back of his car. Then he drove around for about an hour, very fast and careless. I guess he couldn't make up his mind what to do. But after a while he drove to his garage, got some rope and a lot of old iron that was lying around, took me down to the river, and threw me in with about two hundred pounds of the iron as an anchor.

Why am I telling you all this? Because there's a way out for me. You see, if I can get Charlie down here, we can go together before the High Court, and a decision can be made. I can't go by myself, because they have to hear both sides of the story. But I have to get him down here.

All I ask you to do is this: find Charlie and make friends with him; get him to go for a walk with you down to the dock at 79th Street. Just get him there—sometime when there is no one else around—and I'll do the rest. I can manage to get him into the river, but I can't do anything until he gets here.

Do that for me, and I'll be able to rest easier.

I must be getting back now.

That's the way the manuscript ended. But the story isn't over yet.

I did what John Skinner asked me to do. It's a little hard to say why. Maybe it was the overwhelming curiosity which is in the roots of all writers. Maybe I wanted to see if Charlie would break down and confess when we got near the river. Or maybe I wanted to see how John Skinner would get Charlie into the river.

One night we both had quite a lot to drink. I got Charlie to walk down to the river with me on the pretense of sobering up. We had just about reached the water's edge when all of a sudden it happened—and I don't know how. One minute Charlie was up there with me, and the next he had gone in, with a big splash.

I yelled for help, and started taking off my coat and shoes. A man I hadn't realized was nearby came running up, shouting, "What happened?" I told him my friend had fallen into the river, and he ran off to get the police, while I jumped in and tried to get Charlie out. But Charlie's body must have caught onto something, or else John Skinner did manage it somehow. Anyway, they never did get the body back.

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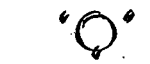
But the worst part was, they didn't believe me. Not a word of what I told them. And when they found out that I owed Charlie quite a bit of money from playing the roulette wheel in the back of his club, they figured that I pushed him in.

I explained over and over again, but it did no good. They couldn't make up their minds whether I was crazy or just trying to be clever; but they finally decided—

All right, Warden, I'm through. I'm ready now—ready for the Waiting Room.



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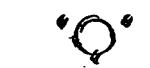

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AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 266th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Yes, the author of "Killing Mr. Killiam" is named Archie Goodwin. On the level! No kidding! We were suspicious ourselves, so we checked it out. And we learned that approximately once every three weeks someone mentions to the author that he has the same name as Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe's legman and assistant . . . Next, perhaps, we'll be receiving "first stories" from writers legitimately named Della Street, Captain Hastings, Nikki Porter—or even Dr. Watson!

Archie Goodwin (middle name, Lee) was 26 when he wrote "Killing Mr. Killiam." He has spent two years in the Army, "defending Petersburg, Virginia," and his vocation is commercial art, including free-lance cartooning.

Archie's "first story" is an amusing, indeed a comic tale; but it has its serious implications—which, we hasten to assure you, in no way diminish the chuckling readability of this saga of Mr. Quimby, master (and in a curious way, mass) murderer . . .

KILLING MR. KILLIAM

by ARCHIE GOODWIN

BY THURSDAY IT HAD USUALLY reached the blunt instrument stage.

It was easy enough on Monday and Tuesday to conceive quite elaborate plans for killing Mr. Killiam, especially after a week-end of rest to build up one's patience. In the five years since Mr. Killiam had won the position of head accountant for the Fitz-Chase Chemical Company over Mr. Quimby (an Accounting Department man of 22 years standing), owing to Killiam's unbeatable qualification of being Mr. Fitz-Chase's son-in-law, Quimby had given birth to numerous excellent methods for hastening Mr. Killiam's demise—from the fanciful notion of the coral snake in the Accounting Department suggestion box to the elaborate scheme of poisoning the eraser tips on Mr. Killiam's pencils which he nibbled at constantly.

These were usually Monday-Tuesday plans, but by Wednesday more violent measures were needed.

Mr. Killiam was an intolerable person. He delighted in making all employees under him, chiefly Quim-

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by, aware that he was ruler of the Accounting domain. Proving this was his perpetual occupation, for in the realm of facts and figures Mr. Killiam was more than incompetent. This he compensated for by applying his one skill, unrelieved harassment, to whoever made him feel most inadequate—whoever invariably being Quimby.

So by the third day of verbal bombardments from Mr. Killiam, Quimby found he could no longer control himself in devising intricate plots for the destruction of his tormentor, and would instead fall back on less novel and more straightforward assassinations—like a shotgun blast from ambush or from a sleek black limousine that hurtled out of the night directly at Killiam with no intention whatever of stopping.

And by Thursday, invariably, Quimby's fantasies would reach the blunt instrument stage.

When patience has been shoved to its outermost limit, when four days of harassment have accumulated on already drooping shoulders, the mind simply will not tolerate further planning or delay. Quimby would seize the nearest, heaviest object, from coat tree to adding machine, and bring it crashing violently onto its objective, Mr. Killiam's bald head. While there was a great esthetic satisfaction in the clearly devised Monday-Tuesday plans, nothing quite so relieved the emotions as a good quick workmanlike Thursday bludgeoning.

This particular Thursday was the apex of a particularly bad week. As early as Tuesday afternoon, Quimby had been driven to using a gun (a German Luger, the bullets smeared with garlic before loading); on Wednesday he had pushed Killiam into a wheat thresher—which he felt particularly bad about, having conceived the situation rashly with no logical plan as to how he would lure Killiam to a wheat field in the first place; and that very morning he had already battered Killiam with a desk lamp, an umbrella, and a Webster's Unabridged Dictionary—the last a bad choice for a weapon since it did not come from the Accounting Department but would have to be procured from Advertising across the hall.

At the moment Quimby had just discovered still another weapon before him. The office boy had left the large ink bottle from which all the individual inkwells were filled standing on Quimby's desk. He studied the potential implement carefully. The glass was quite thick and heavy, and the bottle was more than half full of ink. True, the neck was a trifle short, but Quimby was sure he would still be able to get a good grip on it. He was not sure the bottle would break on use, but in his mind it shattered with the second blow, covering the hated man with its blue-black contents.

The smell of cigar smoke cut short his reverie.

Two persons in the office smoked

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that special brand of cigar: Mr. Fitz-Chase, who avoided coming into the office as often as possible and avoided the Accounting Department even more often; and Mr. Killiam, who avoided neither the Accounting Department nor smoking his father-in-law's cigars.

"Quimby, you got nothing better to do than stare at that ink bottle? A man with only three years between him and the company retirement plan, and who should be afraid of getting fired—a man like that shouldn't be caught gazing blankly at an ink bottle unless there's no work to be done. Is that it, Quimby? You all caught up?"

In desperation Quimby mentally resorted to the ink bottle again. This time it did not break on the second blow, or the third, or the fourth. "I'm afraid there are still some figures to be rechecked on last month's purchase orders, Mr. Killiam, and we're in the middle of getting things ready for the auditors next month. I'm afraid my mind was wandering a little."

"Let's get on the ball, Quimby!" Killiam deliberately exhaled a large puff of smoke into Quimby's face, "I didn't get where I am by letting my mind wander. What you need is a little more work to keep you occupied."

Killiam dropped a sheaf of papers on Quimby's desk. "These are final figures for the annual report. They've got to be checked over so they can go out to the printer this afternoon. I'll pick them up from you right after lunch."

"B-but it's nearly lunchtime now, Mr. Killiam."

"That's why I'm in a hurry, Quimby. You always bring your lunch; you can knock these off while you're eating your cream cheese and jelly sandwiches."

"I usually like to eat my lunch in the park now that it's warm weather, Mr. Killiam."

"Believe me, Quimby," Killiam said, already striding toward his office, "the pigeons won't even miss you. I want those papers back in my hands right after lunch—and checked, you understand?"

Reaching deep into his imagination, Quimby came up with several violent visions. But he rejected them all. It wouldn't do just before lunch. No sense in adding indigestion to the many insults and injuries heaped on him by Killiam. Besides, he had quite indulged himself that morning. No good taking the edge off his murder plots by overdoing them.

Quimby unwrapped his first cream cheese and jelly sandwich and began checking the annual report.

Mr. Quimby was well into his second sandwich and into the fifth page of the annual report when he heard a *plop*. Hardly had his ears sensed this when there followed a *thud*.

Looking up from the annual report and laying down his sandwich, Quimby peered around the office. It was deserted for the lunch hour.

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What, Quimby pondered, goes *plop* and *thud* in an empty office?

At that point Miss Daphne Loris marched determinedly out of Mr. Killiam's office. Though Miss Loris was only a secretary in the Order Department, she was quite well-known in the company, possibly more for her physical attributes than for her abilities with typewriter and dictation pad.

"Hello, Miss Loris," Mr. Quimby said, somewhat embarrassed by the presence of the partially eaten sandwich on his desk and trying to cover it up with one of the sheets of the annual report. "How are things in the Order Department?"

"Dirty old goat!" Miss Loris said, not breaking her stride and taking no notice of Mr. Quimby.

"Oh," said Mr. Quimby, "Is Mr. Killiam still in his office, Miss Loris?"

"Dirty old goat!" Miss Loris said again, still walking purposefully.

"Uh, did you hear any strange noises—something like a plop and a thud, Miss Loris?" Quimby asked.

By now the secretary was far down the hall, but Quimby did hear her say something which sounded not unlike "dirty old goat."

He rose and walked timidly toward Mr. Killiam's office. At the doorway he paused and cleared his throat loudly. Silence.

"Mr. Killiam?" Quimby said, poking his head into the room.

There was no one in sight. The office was its usual picture of order and neatness; since Killiam managed to relegate all Accounting Department duties to his subordinates, there were virtually no papers to clutter his desk. The room's one blemish was the ashtray on Killiam's desk which was always filled.

Quimby stared at the desk. Someone had removed the blemish. His eyes shifted downward and he saw the familiar ashtray lying on the floor; and what was more surprising, it was lying right in front of Mr. Killiam's feet which extended from behind the desk.

Quimby rushed to the desk and peered over it. The Head of the Accounting Department was stretched out flat on his back, surrounded by the contents of the ashtray. The only alteration in his appearance was a large spot of blood on the left side of his forehead which, Quimby saw, corresponded rather neatly with a spot of blood on the bottom of the ashtray. Mr. Killiam lay very still.

Quimby stepped back and shut the office door; then he sat down in one of the guest chairs and eyed with interest the prostrate Mr. Killiam.

Mr. Quimby was puzzled, for most of his fantasies had ended soon after Killiam expired. True, the more elaborate schemes had built-in plans for getting rid of the corpse, but for the most part Quimby had operated on the theory that the body must be found so that it would become known just what sort of

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horrible end Mr. Killiam had come to. No point in putting a lot of work into a job if no one else could appreciate it. Unfortunately, the circumstances under which he always murdered Mr. Killiam never allowed for the fact that he, Quimby, would be the one to discover the body. It was indeed unsettling.

And disappointing.

Not that Miss Loris had made such a bad job of it. Considering that it must have been a spur-of-the-moment act, Quimby could find little to quibble about in the execution. Her choice of the ashtray, with its bulky square shape and the word *THINK* stamped in black letters across the white bowl, had been commendable (although he was sure he'd used it a few years ago himself). Still, when you've killed the same man several times a day for five years, you can't help but feel disappointed when someone steps in and beats you to it—and uses one of your own methods.

As Mr. Quimby was wrestling with his disappointment, the chief cause of this very emotion emitted a slight groan.

"D-did you say something, Mr. Killiam?" Quimby said, startled, but not wishing to offend in case his ears had heard correctly.

Mr. Killiam groaned again.

A tremor of hope stirred in Mr. Quimby.

"You're alive, Mr. Killiam?" Quimby asked anxiously.

Mr. Killiam groaned once more.

Grabbing the ashtray, Quimby raised it over Killiam's head—to strike as he had struck with so many other blunt instruments on so many other Thursdays.

Then he hesitated.

There was no point in rushing into it. Too many sloppy jobs were done as the result of undue haste. Quimby had always condoned the blunt instrument killings because after four days of unremitting harassment his emotions needed it. When Killiam was yelling right in your ear, there wasn't time to plan; your mind had to be decisive.

But Killiam wasn't yelling in Quimby's ear now; he was helpless on the floor. Circumstances had changed, and the change demanded far more finesse.

Well, there was the Aladdin's Lamp cigarette lighter on the desk. It had been a Christmas gift to Killiam from everyone in the department. No trouble at all to set fire to him with it. In fact, that method had been in the back of Quimby's mind when he had selected the gift for the others in the department.

Then there was the office window. Eighteen floors above the street. With a little luck, Mr. Killiam might even regain consciousness while still falling.

Of course those were practical solutions, working from materials at hand. Quimby smiled as he remembered some murders he had devised

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when he had plenty of time to think them out detail by detail. There had been the candy box with the tarantula in the second layer; the personalized stationery with poisoned glue on the envelopes. Would he ever forget the bomb he had planted in Killiam's dictaphone, or the acid in the vodka bottle, or the ingenious means of self-electrocution that Quimby had once worked out?

Yes, there has been so many wonderful ideas that it was truly a pity that Mr. Killiam could die only once. After so many different ways, any one method of killing Killiam hardly seemed adequate. It let the enemy off too easy—far too easy.

And then something occurred to Quimby. What would he do tomorrow, he suddenly asked himself. There would be columns of figures to be totaled, ledgers to be posted, endless checking and rechecking—but what would he think about? What would he do in those many happy moments that he usually spent murdering Mr. Killiam? There was no satisfaction in killing a dead man. It was unsportsmanlike and morbid.

Quimby picked up the phone and quickly dialed the company nurse. "Miss Swanson? Could you hurry over to Mr. Killiam's office? I'm afraid he's had a rather nasty accident."

Quimby could see it all clearly now. Back on the job, Killiam would be grateful, in his condescending way, for Quimby's role in saving his life. "Let's have a drink together, Quimby," he'd say. But in the bar Killiam would be too anxious rushing through the token gesture of gratitude to notice Quimby add a pinch of something to Killiam's drink. Until, of course, after he drank it. Yes, Killiam would be just a trifle late noticing such subtleties.

Quimby could hear the nurse's footsteps approaching the office.

Mr. Killiam groaned.

"Don't worry, Mr. Killiam," Quimby said, smiling, "Everything's going to be all right."

What's a man's life without a dream?

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an unforgettable novelet by

JOHN & WARD HAWKINS

One of the best stories you've ever read on the theme of sudden death on our highways—one of the best because it's real, because it has heart, and because it will hold your interest in an unbreakable grip . . .

FRAME-UP ON THE HIGHWAY

by JOHN & WARD HAWKINS

JIMMY FRANKLIN DIDN'T KNOW how the accident happened. He was driving carefully. A seventeen-year-old with two minor accidents charged to him had to drive carefully. Too, he had just passed the scene of a crash on Lake Boulevard—police cars, an ambulance, a swirling crowd—and the memory of that held his speed down and sharpened his awareness.

The night was clear, the gentle curves of Dutch Hill Road were dry, there was little traffic. He came up on a new and expensive car going about twenty-five. "Mrs. Murphy," he said. He knew the car, knew the driver. She was married to Pop's best customer.

He followed her for a time, wondering why she was just poking along. Then he pulled out and passed her, alert for any danger that might come around an approaching curve. He swung back in good time toward the right-hand lane.

Her headlights were on the high beam. They hit his rear-view mirror and blinded him for a moment, but not long enough to cause him any trouble. There was no car approaching, no reason to hurry. He had done everything right, everything safely, and yet he was no more than across the center stripe when something struck his car a giant blow.

He yelled a hoarse, wordless sound of fear. His car went out of control, tires squalling across dry pavement, the steering wheel twisting in his hands. Jimmy could not think in his panic; he could only fight instinctively and desperately, and he fought with considerable skill.

The careening car almost overturned; somehow he managed to hold it upright. Then it began to fishtail, the rear end whipping back

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and forth, the front end seeking the ditch on either side of the road like a thing possessed.

He was aware that headlights had flashed crazily across the trees on the right of the road, and now he heard a second crash behind him. He was sickened, as if he'd been struck again, but he was fighting too hard to give it thought.

The fishtailing stopped at last. With the car rolling straight, he used the brake—not hard, pumping it carefully—and brought the car to a stop two hundred feet down the road from the point of collision. Shaking, weak with shock, he could not move for a moment. Then awareness came back to him suddenly.

"Mrs. Murphy," he said hoarsely.

He hammered the door of his car open, lunged through it, stumbling, to the road. The road back of him was dark and empty. He yelled the name of the woman again and ran that way—seventeen, a lanky, gangling boy in desperate haste.

The woman's car had left the road on the right side, plunged down a small incline and into a grove of trees. It had struck two trees hard. The chrome-laden front end was crushed, the long and shining hood stood open to the sky. The headlights were out, smashed, but the dash lights glowed. Looking down from the shoulder of the road, Jimmy saw that a man had reached the car before him.

"Is she hurt?" Jimmy called fearfully.

The man was leaning into the car. He straightened and looked at Jimmy. "Yeah, she's hurt." He turned to the car again.

Jimmy went down the bank in clumsy, great strides. There was enough light from the interior of the car, and from the stars and the newly risen half moon, to see the man who had preceded him. He was wearing overalls, a vest, a short-sleeved shirt—a stringy wisp of a man, near fifty. He was trying to pull the inert body of the woman from the car. Jimmy caught his shoulder.

"Don't move her!" He'd had first aid in high school; he knew that much. "You can hurt her bad!"

"She's hurt bad now! She—"

Jimmy pushed past the man and leaned into the car. What he saw filled him with nausea and turned his bones to rubber.

Mrs. Murphy had been a very pretty woman, twenty-five or six, long blonde hair, dark blue eyes. She'd been an actress or something, and there'd been talk about her after she'd married Mr. Murphy. Jimmy hadn't listened much to the things people said, and they sure didn't matter now.

Her face had hit the steering wheel. She was half lying on the seat, unconscious, breathing heavily. There was quite a lot of blood on the seat, in her hair, on her face, and she was still bleeding.

Jimmy fumbled helplessly, mind numb with shock, almost blank.

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Then, suddenly, he found his senses. He backed out of the car and turned on the thin wisp of a man.

"Call a doctor!" he said. "Get an ambulance!"

"Why me? I—"

"Because I can't leave!" Jimmy yelled at him. "There's plenty of houses on the other side of the road! Get up there and get to a phone! Tell 'em Dutch Hill Road near Forty-Seventh. And for gosh sakes, hurry!"

The man stared at Jimmy, open-mouthed, then wheeled and scrambled up the bank. He reached the road and began to run. Jimmy turned back to the injured woman. He tried desperately to control his panic, to think clearly.

Arterial bleeding—look for that first. There was none. Jimmy tore off his warm-up jacket and covered her. He ripped his white shirt apart, made pads, and applied them gently to the woman's face.

Cars passed on the road above, driven by people too preoccupied to read the story the skid marks had to tell. But others stopped. Jimmy was aware of men's voices, excited, questioning. He answered briefly, if at all. He resisted one hand that tried to pull him away from the little he was able to do for the woman.

Presently, sirens moaned to a stop on the road above, doors slammed, and uniformed men came down the slope. A hand touched Jimmy's bare shoulder.

"We'll take over, son," a quiet voice said. "Stand aside."

The police and the ambulance crew took care of Mrs. Murphy, giving her emergency treatment. They lifted her gently to a stretcher and took her away, bandaged, blanket-wrapped and still unconscious.

Jimmy watched it, sitting in the police car, as he'd been told to do. He tried to ignore the curious who peered in at him; he tried not to hear their voices.

"Damn kid! Wouldn't you know?"

"A hot-rodder!"

"Look at that car of his. Flames painted on the fenders! You see a wreck, you see one of those practically every time! They oughta rule 'em off the road!"

Jimmy held his head in his hands. A hot rod—that was a laugh! Roy Wyatt had painted those fenders when he'd owned the car, trying to make it look sharp.

A hot rod! A beat-up, worn-out oil hog was more like it. Fifty miles an hour, down a steep hill with a tail wind, was the best you could get. Buying the car, paying for insurance, feeding it oil—he couldn't afford to repaint the fenders.

But if you were seventeen and had a car you were a hot-rodder—a dirty word.

The police cleared the road. There were two of them, sober and frowning. They came back to the car where Jimmy waited. One of

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them had Jimmy's warm-up jacket in his hand.

"You better put this on son."

Jimmy got out of the car, so shaken he could barely stand. "How is she?" he asked. "Will she be all right?"

The officer with the jacket, Sam Riggio, was a lean-hipped, heavy-shouldered man with a fighter's dark tough face. Mark Bradford, his partner, was tall and wore glasses. Neither man was a stranger to blood and broken bodies; both knew the damage youngsters can do.

Bradford resented teen-age drivers, sometimes to the point of hate, but Bradford had no children of his own. Sam Riggio had a son, fifteen.

Riggio decided that whatever else this skinny, man-tall boy was, he was not a hot-rodder. Where was the long hair, the tight jeans, the boots? This kid was crewcut; he wore cords. He had a homely-good-looking face, with brown eyes that looked at Sam Riggio, pleading.

"She'll make it," Riggio said gruffly.

Grimly, Bradford said, "How about her face?"

"Hold your lip," Sam Riggio said.

The two officers left Jimmy in the car while they took measurements and made sketches. Then they came back to get Jimmy's statement for their reports.

"We're short the name of the guy in overalls," Riggio said. "That's a must—get the name of anybody who might be a witness."

"How could I?" Jimmy asked. "He never came back!"

"Who needs witnesses?" Bradford asked. "The facts speak for themselves. The kid cut back too fast, jammed her wheel."

Riggio scratched his cheek. "At least he didn't make it a hit-and-run like the guy on Lake Boulevard a little while ago. That one left a woman in tough shape. It's ten to one against her."

"I didn't cut back too fast," Jimmy said.

Bradford made a soft sound of ridicule.

Riggio got out of the car suddenly. "Come on, son," he said. When Jimmy was beside him, he shut the door and spoke through the window to his partner, "I'll ride home with the boy in his jalopy. You follow us. And wait outside, will you?"

Bradford nodded.

The right rear door of Jimmy's car was smashed, the glass broken, the right rear fender was crumpled against the wheel. Officer Riggio pulled the metal away from the tire and checked the running gear.

"Looks all right," he said. "Let's go."

He got into the front seat on the right side. Jimmy had to get behind the wheel. His hands were shaking, his legs were weak. He didn't want to drive.

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"I—I don't know if I can," he said.

Riggio got a cigarette from his blouse pocket and took his time lighting it. "This isn't the end," he said. "You've got a lot of years to go, a lot of cars to drive. The time to try again is now. I think you can do it."

Jimmy's eyes watered and his throat hurt—kindness always did that to him. Then he set his jaws. The man said drive, so he'd drive! He got the car going and felt his confidence return.

"I didn't know there were cops like you."

"Only a million of them," Riggio said.

Jimmy kept his eyes on the road. "A couple of things I didn't tell you," he said. "I went past that accident on Lake Boulevard after it happened. It scared me—y'know, a guy thinks how easy it could happen to him. That's one reason I was being careful. The other reason, I recognized Mrs. Murphy's car before I pulled out to pass it. Her husband is a contractor. My father sells heavy equipment. He sells a lot to Mr. Murphy."

Riggio sighed. "How tough can it get?"

"That's one car I wouldn't want to scratch," Jimmy said. "I gave her plenty of room. You can see why I would."

Riggio shook his head. It was a gentle lie—there was no question in his mind as to the cause of the accident.

"Your father buy this car for you?"

"No," Jimmy said. "Pop told me I could have a car when I could pay for it and the insurance and the gas and oil. I saved my money since I was fourteen. I work at Keefer's Supermarket after school. That's where I was tonight. I just came from there."

Where, Riggio wondered tiredly, was the reward for virtue he'd always been hearing about? The hit-and-run driver who had left the elderly woman broken and bleeding on Lake Boulevard would probably never pay for that piece of dirty work. The chance of finding him was slim. But this lad—he'd stayed at the scene, done all he could, seen the blood, and felt the pain—this lad and his family would pay dearly.

Jimmy turned into the driveway of the house where he lived—a comfortable home, white siding, white brick, green shutters, trimmed hedges and green lawn. Suddenly it didn't matter who was to blame. He had to tell his mother and father he'd had another accident, had to watch what hearing it would do to them. This was a prospect that brought him sickness almost beyond bearing. Officer Riggio knew what was in his mind.

"I'll be with you, son," he said.

They went up the walk together. Jimmy opened the front door. There were voices in the living

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room. The TV was going. Pop was in there, resting after a day at the plant and three hours in the garden. Pop grew the best flowers of anybody in the neighborhood.

"Jimmy," his mother said as they walked into the hall, "you're late."

She came into the hall. She saw Officer Riggio and stopped. She was small and slim, she had brown hair and brown eyes. Her name was Ann, but Pop called her Cricket, because she was never still.

She took care of her house and her people at a dead run. Pop had a joke about that. "If she thinks she's going to get double time," he'd say, "she's got a busted sprocket." Pop didn't like his Cricket very much, he was pure crazy about her.

"Jimmy," Cricket whispered, "where's your shirt?"

"I had an accident," Jimmy said.

Cricket closed her eyes. Her mouth got the pinched look it had when she was scared or hurt.

Pop came out of the living room then. He was a big man, heavily muscled, deeply tanned. He had thick, dark hair, dark brows, gray eyes. A laborer at fourteen a construction superintendent at twenty-five. At forty, he was close to being a partner in Western Machinery, selling heavy equipment to highway contractors. Jimmy had always thought he'd be satisfied if he turned out to be half the man Pop was.

"This is Officer Riggio," Jimmy said.

"Come in," Pop said.

He led them into the living room, switched the TV off. Officer Riggio sat on the sofa. Cricket would not let Jimmy beyond the reach of her hands. She made him sit in a chair, then sat on the arm of it beside him.

"Was anyone hurt?" Pop asked.

"A woman," Riggio said. "The driver of the other car."

Jimmy tried to swallow the lump in his throat—tried and failed. "It was Mrs. Murphy, Pop."

Twenty years of construction work had given Roger Franklin a tough face. His thick brows came down in a scowl. The scowl didn't scare Jimmy, though it made him feel immeasurably worse. Pop looked like that only when he'd been hit hard.

"Hurt bad?" Pop asked.

Riggio glanced briefly at Jimmy, then gave the boy's father a look of warning. "Too early to say," he said. "Facial cuts—cheeks, lips, forehead. Concussion, but I don't think a skull fracture. An ambulance took her to Mercy Hospital."

"I'll be right back," Pop said quietly.

He used the telephone in the hall, listening more than he talked. His face had lost color when he returned.

"Still in emergency surgery," he said. He looked at Jimmy. "Maybe you'd better fill us in."

Jimmy told them what had happened, trying to straighten it out in his head. He did it badly, because each part of the memory frightened and sickened him again—the crash,

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fighting to keep his car under control, the second crash, the woman's ruined car, her bleeding face. He was shaking and sweating when he finished.

"I see," Pop said. He looked at Cricket. "Clean him up, will you? Get him a shirt, try to get some food in him—not that he'll eat. Some milk, maybe."

Cricket touched Jimmy's arm. "Come on, son."

"Pop," Jimmy said, "you'll call the hospital again?"

"In a little while," Pop said.

He waited until Cricket and Jimmy were beyond hearing behind the swinging door, then turned to Officer Riggio, his tough face softened with concern.

"Is it as bad as it sounds?"

Officer Riggio took a deep breath. "I like to call on parents after accidents, y'know? When the youngster's committed a crime—speeding, squirreling, drinking, reckless driving—I warn the parents so they can take a hand. A lot of kids need a whipping." His eyes came up to meet Pop's. "Your son's not like that. He's a good boy."

"I know that well," Pop said. "But both his mother and I thank you for saying it."

"The hospital told you about the woman's face? That it could be disfigured?" Riggio waited for Pop's nod, then went on, "I didn't think it was time to hit the boy with that. He'll have to know, but why not a little at a time?"

"Thanks again," Pop said.

"The accident—" Riggio said. He got his notebook from his pocket. "Weather clear, road dry. The woman was driving at a moderate speed. The boy passed her, going about forty-five. No visibility problem, no oncoming traffic. The cars collided in the right-hand lane—the tire marks, glass, mud on the pavement show that, beyond doubt. The woman was taken to the hospital unconscious. I couldn't get a statement from her. The boy honestly believes he did everything according to the book, safely. The facts say something else."

Pop said, "He cut back too fast."

"He's seventeen," Riggio said. "He's got a right to drive. But how long does it take to learn? And who pays for the mistakes kids make while they're learning?"

"A tough question," Pop said. "I don't want to answer it now—not for the record."

"I know—they don't give kids much insurance."

"And I'm not a rich man," Pop said.

He walked to the front door with Officer Riggio, thanked him again, and let him out. Then he called the hospital. Mrs. Murphy was off the critical list, sleeping under sedation. No, there had been no skull fracture. Yes, her face had been damaged. Broken nose, broken cheekbone, severe lacerations.

Pop put the telephone down, a very sober man. He went into the

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kitchen to face two very worried people.

"Off the critical list," he said, "but her face took a real beating."

"I knew it!" Jimmy said. "I saw her." He slammed a fist into a cupped palm. "She was so pretty,"

Cricket whispered, "The poor woman."

"One of us has to call Charlie Stern," Pop said. "The insurance company is going to get hit hard on this one. They'd better know."

"It's my insurance," Jimmy said. "I'll call him."

Pop and Cricket waited in the kitchen. They listened to the one-sided conversation, anguish in their faces. They expected him to be heartbroken and utterly defeated when he came back, but his round face was tight and there was anger in his eyes.

"He didn't believe me either!" he said.

"Believe what?" Pop said.

"That I didn't cut back too fast. I told him how the accident happened. He didn't say it right out—he said, 'Don't admit the blame to anybody'—but he might as well have said it."

"Jimmy—"

"I had two other accidents," Jimmy said. "An old lady with thick glasses and a dog jumping around in her car; a fat guy who smelled like a brewery. His fender—the one that got nicked—had dents so old they had rust in them. I'm a teenager, so I'm wrong all the way. He gets a new fender and I get the blame. The old lady—"

"The facts say this one's your fault."

"The cop's facts." Jimmy was pacing the kitchen. "While you were in there talking to Riggio, telling each other what lousy drivers kids are, I was out here, thinking about my facts. I'd like to have somebody listen while I tell 'em."

Pop's voice was firm. "Whoa, Jimmy."

Jimmy paused in mid-stride, dropped his hands. "I was yelling. I'm sorry," he said. "But I was driving with extra care because I'd passed where there'd been a hit-and-run accident—cops all over, ambulance, crowds."

Pop said, "On Lake Boulevard. We heard about it on TV."

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "Accidents scare me, so I was driving carefully. And I recognized Mrs. Murphy's car. Mr. Murphy's one of your best customers. I'd run in the ditch before I scratched that car. Wouldn't I?"

"If you had a choice," Pop said.

"I tell you I gave her plenty of room."

"The collision was in the right-hand lane."

"Does that mean it was my fault?"

Pop said, "I'm afraid it does."

"What if she ran into me?" Jimmy said. "What if she hit the gas? With all the horsepower she's got in that car, she'd be up my back before I knew it."

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Pop stared at the boy. "Jimmy, for the love of Mike!"

"It could happen," Jimmy said. "How fantastic can you get?"

Cricket said, "Please, Pop. He's upset. Let's don't talk about it now."

Jimmy looked at her. "You don't believe me either."

"I didn't say that, son. I—"

"You don't have to say it." He looked at his father. "Or you, Pop. You both think I'm trying to alibi, trying to chicken out of my responsibility. You both think I'm a liar."

"I do not!" Cricket said.

"Honestly mistaken," Pop said. "I don't doubt for a moment you believe you were driving safely. You may have been thinking too much about the accident you'd seen and not enough about your driving. You may have misjudged speed and distance. Face it, Jimmy; no one would overtake a passing car deliberately. You can't sell it to me or anyone. Don't try to sell it to yourself."

Jimmy's face was tight. "That's the last word?"

"That's it." Pop stood up. "I've got to go and talk to Ben Murphy and tell him how I feel about his wife being hurt." He looked at his son. "You don't have to go."

Cricket said, "Not tonight! Jimmy's—"

"I'm all right," Jimmy said. "I'll go."

Pop and Jimmy reached Ben Murphy's gate at ten o'clock. The yard lights were on, a dozen or more scattered over an acre of tableland bulldozed out of the hillside. A brick wall paralleled the road.

"High enough to discourage outsiders," Pop had once said, "low enough to let them see what they're missing."

The house, ablaze with lights, was long and low, white brick and glass and red roof tile. Pop parked the family station wagon beside a bullet-nosed sports car in the drive.

"Pop," Jimmy said, his face still tight, "no matter what you think or I think, I can't take the blame. Charlie Stern told me not to."

"We're not here to take the blame," Pop said. "We're here to show we're responsible people, that we're as sorry as people can be that Mrs. Murphy was hurt."

They got out of the car and followed a white walk around the house to the front door. Ben Murphy answered their ring. He was wearing a light topcoat and a hat and held a drink in one hand. He was a stocky bull of a man. His face was round and flushed, his mouth full-lipped. His eyes were hard flat chips of glass that caught and held the light.

"Franklin," he said, "what do you want?"

Pop said, "This is my son, Jimmy. He was—"

"Sure!" Murphy's voice was

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harsh. "James Franklin! That was the name they gave me, but I didn't tie it to you." He looked at Jimmy, sudden fury clouding his face. "You lousy little punk! Do you know what you did to my wife? You damned near killed her, that's what you did. You tore her face all to hell!"

Jimmy said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Murphy. I—"

"Sorry! You should see her! I just came from the hospital, and I tell you it tore me apart. A beautiful face—in shambles. Nose smashed, eyes closed, deep cuts." He lifted his glass and swore. "You're sorry! You're gonna be worse than sorry!"

Pop eased his big bulk in front of Jimmy. "Slow down, Ben." His voice was soft, but it held an edge. "We came to tell you we couldn't feel worse about it and that we're standing by. Don't rough the lad; he's feeling bad enough."

"Let him talk," Jimmy said.

"What's that?" Murphy's voice was sharp. He tried to see past Pop. "You smart-talking me, kid?"

"No, sir, I'm not," Jimmy said. "I know how you feel about Mrs. Murphy. Take it out on me if you want to. I saw her right after the accident—I took care of her. And I wish I had somebody to take it out on."

Murphy stared at Jimmy a moment. Then, to Pop, he said, "Get this kid outta here!" His voice was hoarse, shaking. "I don't trust myself. That murdering brat of yours—I'd like to use my hands on him. Run my wife off the road—" His mouth jerked. "You'll hear from me, Franklin. You'll hear from me!"

Pop turned and took Jimmy's arm. "Come on, lad."

Pop and Cricket sat in the kitchen, facing each other across the kitchen table, after Jimmy had gone to bed. They didn't joke as they usually did, hunting light words to make a serious moment less painful. Cricket's hands were locked together. Pop rubbed his face.

"Ben Murphy is not what you'd call a kind man," he said. "He's rough and at times he can be as ugly as sin. I think he'll be ugly about this. A second wife, twenty-five years younger than he is, a beautiful woman—to a man like Ben, a woman like that is more than a wife. She's a prize possession—proof he's a success as a man and as a businessman."

Cricket said, "She's no better than she—"

"Hey, now!"

Cricket caught a lip in her teeth. She was silent a long moment, struggling with herself. Then her eyes came up to meet Pop's. "Can I take that back?"

"Sure, hon," Pop said gently. "I thought the same thing; I had to take it back too. No matter what she is, she's suffering now. Calling her names won't help us or Jimmy."

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Cricket nodded miserably. "I know."

"Ben would sue his grandmother for a scratched fender," Pop said. "For a personal injury—this kind of personal injury—he'll be downright savage."

"Jimmy has liability insurance."

"Ten thousand." Pop got up from the table to pace the kitchen slowly. "How much is a woman's face worth, Cricket? Any woman, and a beautiful woman in particular?"

Wearily Cricket said, "Whatever you can get."

"Right," Pop said. "And anything over the insurance will come out of us. Fifty thousand, a hundred thousand—what's the difference? We've done all right, but it wouldn't take a big judgment to clean us out. Jimmy's insurance company will fight the suit and we'll fight it. But we might as well take the truth by the nose—Jimmy was to blame. We haven't got a chance."

"Don't tell Jimmy—please!"

Pop went to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "He'll have to know," he said, "but later will be soon enough."

"I wish they hadn't invented automobiles."

"Or damage suits," Pop said. "I've worried about this every time I heard the boy start his car."

Jimmy was up early the next morning and gone early. He did his homework in the study hall before school started. That was part of the deal he'd made with Pop. He could work at the supermarket, earning money to pay for the car, but if his grades went down—blooie!—no job, and the car went into the garage and stayed there. And he was campused—no movies, no dates, until his report card was good again.

He had a little trouble concentrating—the accident, the memory of Mrs. Murphy's bleeding face kept getting in the way. But he got through the school hours somehow. And he went from school to the police station. The law said he had to file a report within twenty-four hours of the accident.

A uniformed man gave him a blank and pointed to a desk. Jimmy filled in the spaces of the blank. He drew a diagram—Car A, Car B—showing how the accident had happened, then took the form back to the man at the counter.

"Car A hit Car B." The policeman looked at Jimmy. "Car B is your car. Are you trying to say she ran into you after you passed her?"

Jimmy's face flushed. "Yes, sir."

"Good Lord!" the officer said. "Of all the flimsy alibis I ever heard, that takes the cake!" He threw the form in a box. "Now I've heard everything!"

Jimmy left the counter and the police station, his cheeks flaming. He got into his car and fumbled with the keys. Every time, every goshdarned time! If you were seventeen, you were a slob, a lying slob! The

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cops, Charlie Stern, Pop, Cricket, Mr. Murphy—not one of them would even say "maybe."

"I'll show 'em," he said, "or bust something!"

He stopped at the supermarket and talked to the manager. "You've got time off coming," the manager said. "Take as much as you need."

Jimmy went back to his car. He drove out Dutch Hill Road to Forty-seventh, parked there, and looked around. Houses on one side of the road, brush and trees on the other. Most of the houses close by were big and new, with fine lawns and lots of shrubs. But there were old places, weathered and shabby, on the side streets that wandered away toward the hill.

"One of those," Jimmy said.

He left the car. He climbed sun- and rain-warped steps and rang an old-fashioned doorbell. He talked to a woman with gray hair and watery eyes.

"I'm looking for a man who saw an accident last night," he said. "He wears bib overalls and a vest and a shirt with chopped-off sleeves."

"Nobody here like that," the woman said.

"Thanks anyway," Jimmy said.

He knocked on the other doors. He talked to an old man, to a girl who wouldn't smile because she had braces on her teeth, to a woman whose hair was redder than any fire engine he had ever seen.

He walked up one street and down another. Before he ran out of daylight, he had been to every old house within a quarter mile of the scene of the accident.

After dinner he spread a map of the city on the kitchen table and began to pencil out the streets he'd covered. Pop and Cricket came to look over his shoulder and ask what he was doing.

"Keeping track of where I've been," Jimmy said. "That way I don't have to go over the same ground twice."

"You're looking for the witness?" Pop said.

"Yes," Jimmy said. "He was on foot. I figure he lives within maybe a mile of where the accident happened."

"That could be." Pop's frown said he was thinking hard. "One thing you'd better face, son. When you find him, he may break your heart. He may not have seen it or he may say you're to blame."

"Then I'll know," Jimmy said.

The next afternoon Jimmy took up the search as soon as school was out. He knocked on fifty or sixty doors, asking the same questions every time. Most of those he talked to were interested; most of them tried to help. Two people were sure they knew the man he was hunting, but both were wrong. One of the men they sent Jimmy to see was confined to a wheel chair, the other had been in Alaska for more than a month.

He used up the afternoon. He was walking back to his car when the

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bullet-nosed sports job came down the street, Ben Murphy at the wheel. The stocky man parked at the curb, close by.

"Over here," he said. "I want to talk to you."

"Yes, sir," Jimmy said.

"I was rough with you the other night," Murphy said. He wasn't smiling, but there was no anger in his face. "My wife goes downtown to buy a hat; next thing she's in the hospital. I was worried sick about her. Naturally. Since then, I've had time to think. I've known and liked your father for a long time, done a lot of business with him. I don't want him hurt or you hurt."

Jimmy said, "Well, thanks, Mr. Murphy."

"The bills have to be paid—the hospital, the doctors, the garage. Your insurance will take care of them." Murphy's eyes had no part in his brief smile. "This is between friends, boy. Let's keep it that way."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You're a worried guy," Murphy said. "You'd be less than human if you weren't. It could be unpleasant—complaints, litigation, your driver's license gone." He smiled again. "I see your car out here every time I go by. You're scrambling around trying to find something—somebody to get you off the hook. Right?"

"The witness," Jimmy said.

"A waste," Murphy said. "Forget it. Nothing's going to happen to you. Go home and rest your feet. The insurance company will pay the bills and everything will be fine." He put the car in gear. "And be careful, kid. The next guy might not be a friend of your father's."

Jimmy said, "Mr. Murphy, I —"

But the sports car was moving, gravel spurting under the wheels. The tail-lights flared red, and it was gone around a corner. Jimmy stared after it.

"Fine!" he said. "As long as my insurance company has to pay, it's fine! And what does that do to me?"

Jimmy set his jaws. No matter what Mr. Murphy said, he wasn't quitting yet. The man in the bib overalls had to live somewhere. He'd been on foot. He—

"Wait a darned minute!" Jimmy said.

He went back to his car, a new idea in his mind. The house nearest the scene of the accident was new and very big. The woman who answered the door was young, a pretty woman. She listened gravely to Jimmy's description of the witness.

"No," she said. "He doesn't live here."

"What I thought, he might work for you," Jimmy said. "Mowing the lawn, trimming the shrubs. One of the odd-job men that come around. Sometimes they leave a card."

"Sorry," the woman said.

Jimmy tried the house next door, the one next door to that. He found a blond and chunky man who had seen the witness.

"Asked me to call an ambulance,"

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he told Jimmy. "A stranger, though. I'd never seen him before. I've never seen him since."

Jimmy found people who'd heard the crash, who'd gone to see what had happened, but none who remembered a thin gray man who wore overalls and a vest.

"*Somebody* must know the guy," Jimmy said.

He went on with it, until dusk thickened into dark. He went home to find Pop and Cricket talking quietly in the kitchen. They stopped talking when he walked in.

He didn't have to tell them he'd had no luck; they saw it in his face. Cricket was suddenly very busy at the range. Pop crumpled a beer can in his hands.

"Charlie Stern called," he said quietly.

Jimmy said, "I'm fresh out of insurance?"

"That's the size of it," Pop said. "Charlie'll try to get you in the assigned-risk pool, but that'll take time."

"And cost more," Jimmy said.

"I can drive you around evenings," Pop said.

"No," Jimmy said. "But you gave me an idea."

Two people could cover twice as much ground as one. Ten or twelve could hit every house within a mile in just one afternoon. A lot of kids he knew had cars, and not all of them had jobs.

Jimmy made a list and got on the telephone. Beans Hall had an appointment with a dentist. Jack Davis had a tennis date.

"I'll skip that," he said. "Ringing doorbells might be fun."

"I'll buy your gas—two gallons," Jimmy said.

He had it organized before he went to bed. Nine cars and twenty kids showed up on Dutch Hill Road at Forty-Seventh, the next afternoon. Jimmy spread his map on the hood of Jack Davis' car.

"Each car gets a street," Jimmy said. "Up one side and down the other. Every house—don't miss even one. Then come back and report and get a new assignment."

"What if we find the guy?" Jack Davis said.

Jimmy said, "You get two extra gallons of gas."

He stayed behind as the cars fanned out through the neighborhood. He found a stump beside the road and used it for a desk. Just keeping track of where the kids had been turned out to be a job.

Sometimes there were two or three cars lined up, waiting to report. And twenty searchers could have as little luck as one. The kids turned up several people who had seen the man, but none who knew his name or where he lived.

"We'll keep goin'," Jimmy said.

He was talking to Fats Porter and Bob Hentley when he heard the blaring horn. Busy with the map and pencil, he did not look up. The horn yelled again and again. Fats Porter

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grunted his disgust, turned away, then turned back.

"Jim," he said, "I think the guy wants you."

Jimmy looked up. The bullet-nosed sports job was back again, parked on the shoulder of the road. Ben Murphy was peering over his shoulder. He hit the horn again, beckoned impatiently.

"I'll be right back," Jimmy said.

There was no smile on Ben Murphy's face. "You!" He thrust the word at Jimmy with a lifted chin. "I told you to go home and rest your feet!" he said. "Didn't you hear me, kid?"

"Yes," Jimmy said. "I heard you."

"So now you brought your gang!" Murphy's voice was harsh. His big hands gripped the wheel so tightly the cords of his wrists stood out like iron wire. "I was nice to you. Let it alone, let the insurance company pay the bills—that's all I asked. But no! You want to mess it up, shove it into court, make it tough for me to collect!"

"It wasn't my fault," Jimmy said.

"I'm giving you one more chance!" Murphy said. "Keep on and you'll get it—in the neck! You and your old man. I'll take care of you first. My wife will sign a complaint, criminal negligence, reckless driving. You'll be looking at a judge before you know it. You'll lose your license, get slapped with a fine, maybe a jail sentence. And that's only the beginning! We'll sue your father for a hundred thousand dollars for what you did to my wife's face!"

Jimmy said, "You can't—"

"The hell I can't!" Murphy said. "You're a minor; he's responsible for what you do. I'll sue and I'll win and I'll clean him out—every last dime, house, car, everything. He'll be the rest of his life paying off the judgment, and that's a promise, kid!" His lips flattened. "Go home and stay there, or you and your father will be in more trouble than you ever dreamed about!"

"Yes, sir," Jimmy said.

He watched the sports car roar away and then went back to the stump he'd used for a desk. He picked up the map and folded it carefully. He looked at his friends, eyes dull.

"You can take off," he said. "We're through."

He found Pop working in the garden, stripped to the waist. Pop wouldn't use a power cultivator. "These mitts of mine like the feel of an idiot-stick," he'd said. The truth was that Pop liked hard work.

One look at Jimmy's face was enough to bring him out of the garden.

"You found your witness," he said.

"No. And I guess I'm not going to. Mr. Murphy said he was going to sue you if I kept trying to cause him trouble." Jimmy swallowed. "Can he do that, Pop? I mean, for

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a lot of money. A hundred thousand —everything you've got?"

"I've been expecting him to," Pop said quietly.

Jimmy's voice broke. "Why didn't you tell me? I thought my insurance would be enough. I could have gone on looking and ruined you."

Pop's face was tight with thought, his eyes searching. "When did Murphy make this pitch about cleaning me out?"

"Just a while ago," Jimmy said. "The first time I saw him, he said he wasn't going to sign a complaint. All he wanted was for my insurance company to pay for everything. Great for him, but not for me so I kept on looking. This time he got real mean. Said if I didn't quit trying to get out of paying he'd clean you out."

"He did, did he?" Pop took Jimmy to a set of lawn chairs and made him repeat every word of both conversations he'd had with Murphy. There was anger in Pop's face, mixed with deep concern. "Still think you were in the clear on the accident?" he asked.

"I *know* I was."

"But now you're willing to throw in the sponge?"

"For gosh sakes, Pop! If it was just me, I wouldn't care. But it's you and Mom now. I can't do anything that would make Mr. Murphy ruin you!"

Pop laid a big hand on Jimmy's arm. "That's a tough thing to say to your old man. You'd give up fighting for something you feel is right to protect me. Am I so helpless?"

"Pop, I didn't mean—"

The big hand tightened on Jimmy's arm. "Don't ever quit," Pop said slowly, "don't ever quit anything you think is right as long as you've got a breath left in your body. Every man's got a light that guides him. Turn it off for me, for anybody, and you'll get lost in the dark."

"You want me to go on?"

Pop nodded. "Come hell or high water. And if you want help, I'll give a hand."

Jimmy got up from the chair, excitement growing in him. "I could use some help, Pop. There are places me and the kids couldn't look because we're minors. I thought a man like him might spend a lot of time in taverns and bars. They won't let me in alone, but if you were with me they might."

"What do you mean, might?" Pop stood up, six feet tall, one hundred and ninety pounds of hard bone and muscle. He swelled his chest for Jimmy. "Who's going to argue?"

Jimmy grinned, delighted. "Nobody!"

"So, okay," Pop said. "Get the car out."

Jimmy watched him cross the yard toward the house, so proud he could hardly stand it. "What a guy to have for a Pop!" he said. "A one-man army!"

He ran for the garage and backed

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the station wagon into the drive. Pop came out of the house presently, wearing slacks and a sports shirt, and got behind the wheel.

"You're the skipper," he said. "Where to?"

"He was walking," Jimmy said. "He could have been on his way *to* a place or on his way *from* one. We could start where I had the accident and hunt in one direction. If we don't have any luck, we can come back and hunt the other way."

"Will do!" Pop put the car on the road.

They began their search at a crossroads a half mile from the scene of the accident. There were two stores here—a service station and a tavern. The men in the tavern swung around to stare at Jimmy, and the bartender came down the bar to wave him away. Then Pop came through the door.

"Hold fast," Pop said. "This is my son."

The bartender looked at the spread of Pop's shoulders, at the size of his arms, at the thick brows that were in a scowl.

"Yes, sir," he said. "What can we do for you?"

Pop said, "Take it, Jimmy."

"I'm looking for a man who saw an accident," Jimmy said.

He got to look in the face of every man there, and no one protested. They listened to his description, they tried very hard to place the man, and all of them were genuinely sorry when they could not be of help.

"I'll ask around," the bartender said. "Come back in a day or two if you don't have any luck."

"Thank you all," Jimmy said.

The next place was another tavern, and the scene was repeated. It was followed by four more taverns, three cheap bars, and a package store where wine was sold.

They didn't find their man, but it was not because of resistance. The round-faced, man-tall boy and the quiet, big-shouldered man were a team no one cared to deny.

When they had covered every place within a reasonable walking distance in one direction, Pop turned the car and they began to hunt in the other.

"Still with me?" Pop asked.

"We'll find him," Jimmy said. "We can't miss."

They found him in a dingy, hole-in-the-wall joint. He was drinking wine with a beer chaser in a booth toward the back. Jimmy almost missed him because he was wearing a suit instead of overalls and a vest. A thin wisp of a man, older than his fifty years, unshaven. He had a weak mouth and blurred eyes.

"Do you remember me?" Jimmy asked.

"Maybe I do," the man said. "And maybe I don't."

Pop came up behind Jimmy. He put a big hand on the table. "Make up your mind," he said quietly.

The blurred eyes looked at the

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hand for a long moment. "Yeah," the man said then. "I remember you, kid."

Jimmy's knees almost folded under him. After all the hours of searching —finally! He tried to swallow and found his throat too dry.

"Did you see the accident happen?"

"I was there, wasn't I? Yeah, I saw it."

"Whose fault was it?" Jimmy asked. "Mine or hers?"

The man rubbed his stubbled chin. He took a drink of wine and a swallow of beer. Then he grinned at Jimmy.

"Yours, kid," he said. "You cut in on her and ran her off the road."

The color drained from Jimmy's face, the strength drained from his legs. Pop put a hand on his shoulder and turned him. Jimmy started a protest, but the hurt and deep sympathy in his father's face told him the case was closed.

He pulled free of his father's hand and went out and got into the car. In a few moments Pop came out and got in beside him.

"Tough," Pop said gently. "I'm sorry, lad."

Jimmy didn't answer.

Pop fumbled with the car keys. "It was a chance we both knew you were taking. So you lost. But I'm still damned proud of you. You gave it a good fight."

Jimmy turned a quivering face toward his father. "I wasn't taking a chance," he said. "I knew if I found the guy, if he'd seen the accident, he'd clear me. Why? Because I *know* I didn't cut back too fast!"

"He saw the accident. He said—"

"Pop! He lied!"

Pop stared at Jimmy. Then, suddenly, he swore. "What in hell is the matter with me?" he asked. "I can believe a booze-brain or I can believe my son. Who do I believe? The booze-brain. I ought to have my rump kicked!" He slapped the door of the station wagon open. "Be right back!" he said.

He was gone five minutes—an eternity for Jimmy. And when he came back, he was grinning. "You're the champ," he said.

Jimmy's face began to light. "Pop, did he really—"

"He sure did," Pop said. "I offered him twenty-five bucks to see the accident our way. He said no. I said fifty bucks and he said no. I said a hundred, and he said yes."

"No, Pop!" Jimmy's voice was agonized.

Pop grinned. "Easy does it, boy. All I wanted was to find out if he was for sale. He was. So I put my fist under his nose and asked if maybe he hadn't sold out to Murphy first. Turns out he had. For fifty bucks."

"Murphy paid him?"

"This is a wino," Pop said. "His brains are pulp. He'd sell his soul for the price of a few bottles, and he can't think farther ahead than a few. He saw Mrs. Murphy run into you after you'd passed her—the accident

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was her fault. You're a kid, driving a heap. You couldn't pay him anything to testify. But a man who owned the car Mrs. Murphy was driving could afford to pay him not to testify. He got Murphy's name and address from the newspaper account of the accident, went around to Murphy, and made his pitch—pay up or he'd look you up. Murphy paid."

"But that makes Mr. Murphy a crook!"

"So it does," Pop agreed.

"Why—why would he do it?"

"It's a chance to clip your insurance company for your public liability—ten thousand bucks—and for a bandit like Murphy that's important. Sure, he's got insurance of his own. One-hundred-dollar deductible and maybe seventy-fifty medical—about a tenth of what's going to be needed. And without that witness, he's got grounds for a lawsuit against you and your insurance company—his wife's beautiful face has been smashed. What's the value on that? Fifty thousand? All this he gets for just fifty bucks."

"No wonder he was afraid I'd find the witness."

"Yeah," Pop said. "No wonder." He put the car in gear.

"Wait a minute, Pop," Jimmy said. He was staring through the windshield. "Now we've got to think about something else—something that's been driving me nuts. She ran into me. We can prove that now. But how? And why? Stop and think about it. The only way—she'd have to do it deliberately."

"Her foot could slip off the brake—"

"And jam the gas down? And hold it down that long?"

"For the love of Mike!" Pop said. "She wasn't mad at you. She couldn't gain anything by running into you. She could get herself in a bad smash-up, and she did! Jimmy, lad, it just doesn't make sense!"

"Maybe it does." Jimmy turned his head slowly to look at his father. "Remember the tangle I had with the guy who smelled like a brewery? He had a beat-up fender; he got a brand-new fender out of the accident. Maybe Mrs. Murphy wanted to hit me just a little, to cover up a bent fender or something like that. But she hit me a lot and went out of control."

"The Murphys can afford to fix their own fenders."

"You've got to run into something to bend a fender," Jimmy said. "Can they afford to fix what Mrs. Murphy hit before she ran into me?" He looked at his father. "I may be wrong, but I've got to talk to the cops. Right now. Will you take me downtown?"

"When you tell me what's in your head," Pop said.

They walked into the police station together, faces grave with concern. There was doubt in their minds, but their responsibility was clear to them, and responsibility can

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sometimes be an enormous burden. Jimmy talked to the lieutenant in charge of traffic.

"I went by that hit-and-run accident on Lake Boulevard, just after it happened," he said. "It scared me pretty bad. I've been thinking about it a lot, watching the papers. But I've never seen where you found the driver."

"We haven't found him." The lieutenant was a thin, sharp-nosed, dour man. "But I'd give my right arm to find him. The old woman he left in the gutter will live, but she'll never walk again."

Jimmy swallowed. "Could the driver have been a woman?"

The lieutenant, looking at Jimmy's pale face, wondered if the boy was going to be sick.

"It could have been a woman," he said slowly. "All we've got is a description of the car—a big, late-model sedan."

Jimmy turned his stricken eyes to Pop, asking for help, for guidance. But what help could there be? And what guidance, except to point the way straight forward? Pop put a big hand on Jimmy's shoulder.

"I don't know for sure," Jimmy said. "I'm not accusing anybody, see? But I've got to tell you what happened. After I passed the accident on Lake Boulevard, I went out Dutch Hill Road—that's the way I go home. There was a woman driving real slow out there. I passed her. And after I passed her, she speeded up and ran into me."

The lieutenant tipped his head. "She ran into you? After you passed her?"

"We've got a witness," Pop said.

"All right. Go on, son."

"The woman, Mrs. Murphy, had been downtown buying a hat—her husband told me that. She'd go home by way of Lake Boulevard. Everybody does who lives out our way. It's quickest by fifteen minutes. So she had to go past the place where the woman was hit. If she'd stopped to think what she could do or drove real slow, I'd have caught up with her where I did." Jimmy's eyes were miserable. "Why would anybody run into a guy on purpose?"

"You tell me," the lieutenant said.

"To cover up something like a bent fender?"

"Or a cracked headlight," the lieutenant said softly, "or a dented hood. Because every car that's gone into any garage with that kind of damage has been reported to us and we've checked it out. Mrs. Murphy's car was checked out, but the damage was blamed on you. You'd better tell me the name of your witness, son."

Patrolman Sam Riggio came to the Franklin home early the next evening. There was no need for him to do it. But he, too, was a man with a sense of responsibility. He made his partner, Mark Bradford, go to the door with him.

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Bradford was the man who resented teen-age drivers, sometimes to the point of hate. Riggio was smiling when Pop opened the door.

"We'd like to talk to Jimmy."

Pop led them into the living room. Jimmy was playing cribbage with Cricket. He stumbled to his feet awkwardly at the sight of the police officers, his round face twisting in a worried frown.

Cricket said, "Oh, my goodness!" and flew around the room, picking up papers and straightening cushions.

"We've come with an apology," Riggio told Jimmy. "We didn't call you a liar, but we refused to believe you, and that adds up to the same thing."

Bradford stepped forward. "You've got a right to chew us out," he said, "but I've got to tell you there's not much left to chew. The lieutenant got to us first. We jumped to a wrong conclusion; we let a hit-and-run driver get away. The lieutenant takes a dim view of that kind of work. We're lucky to be alive."

Jimmy said, "Did—did Mrs. Murphy do it?"

Riggio nodded. "Once we'd talked to your witness, it was easy going. We went from him to Murphy to ask Murphy why he'd paid the fifty dollars, and from there to Mrs. Murphy to ask why she'd run into you on purpose, since it had to be that way. She's not a tough criminal with a thought-out plan. She's a frightened woman with an enormous burden of guilt. She wanted to be rid of it. She gave us a confession."

Pop was frowning. "Did Murphy know about the hit-and-run when he paid the wino the fifty bucks?"

"No," Riggio said. "And neither did the wino. When the wino showed up at Murphy's front door with an offer to get lost and keep his mouth shut for fifty dollars, Murphy grabbed it like a shot. It was small money, money he could throw away or deny he'd ever spent. And it cleared his wife of the blame of hitting Jimmy."

"It also paved the way to a damage suit," Pop said, "against Jimmy, his insurance company, and me. A damage suit that could go fifty or a hundred thousand. A real bargain for fifty bucks."

"Not such a bargain." Riggio smiled. "When he'd thought about it a while, Murphy saw that his wife must have run into Jimmy on purpose. He asked her why, she told him, and then he had a can of beans he was afraid to open. What could he do about the wino? He couldn't go to him with more money and a ticket out of the state. The wino would want to know why—all he'd asked for, all he'd wanted, was fifty bucks. And if the wino found out why, he could blackmail Murphy for the rest of his life."

"But leave it alone," Pop said, "and it was a million to one the wino would never put the two accidents

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together. The police didn't and their brains aren't pulp."

"That was his choice," Riggio agreed. "A Hobson's choice, and Murphy made the wrong pick. He calls it bad luck. I call it the kind of thing that happens to a man with larceny in his heart."

Cricket said, "He should have gone to the police and admitted his wife was the hit-and-run driver."

"And face criminal action and a lawsuit that could bankrupt him?" Pop asked. "Not Murphy!"

When the police had gone, Pop put his arm around Jimmy's shoulders and grinned proudly at Cricket. "This is my boy," he said. "His guts and good sense saved me a fortune."

Cricket knew her son well, knew why there was no light in the boy's eyes, why he tried to pull away from his father.

"Mrs. Murphy will be all right, Jimmy," she said. "I've talked to her doctor. It isn't so bad as they first thought. There may not even be noticeable scars. She'll be pretty again."

Jimmy turned to her, doubting. "Mom, honest?"

"I promise."

"That's—that's wonderful." Now Jimmy's face began to glow. "If you could have seen her the way I did. I thought—well, I was afraid to think! Holy cow!"

He caught his mother's face suddenly between his hands and kissed her. "You're the most!" he said to her, and went quickly away.

Pop stared after him. "After what she did to the old lady, after what she tried to do to him, he's worried about her face! How do you like a dope like that?"

Softly Cricket said, "Only very, very much.

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DEPARTMENT OF FAMOUS LITERARY FIGURES

An "unknown" tale by the great French master of the short story—a tale that has been called "one of the unmatched horror stories of the world" . . .

VENDETTA

by GUY de MAUPASSANT

THE WIDOW OF PAOLO SAVERINI lived alone with her son in a poor little house on the outskirts of Bonifacio. The city, built on an outjutting part of the mountain, in places even overhanging the sea, looks across the foamy straits toward the southernmost coast of Sardinia. Around on the other side of the city is a kind of *fjord* which serves as a port, and which, after a winding journey, brings—as far as the first houses—the little Italian and Sardinian fishing smacks and, every two weeks, the old wheezy steamer which makes the trip to Ajaccio.

On the white mountain the clump of houses makes an even whiter spot. They look like the nests of wild birds, clinging to this peak, overlooking this terrible passage where vessels rarely venture. The wind, which blows uninterruptedly, has swept bare the forbidding coast; it engulfs itself in the narrow straits and lays waste both sides. The pale streaks of foam, clinging to the black rocks, whose countless peaks rise up out of the water, look like bits of rag floating and drifting on the surface of the sea.

The house of Widow Saverini, clinging to the very edge of the precipice, looked out, through its three windows, over this wild and desolate picture. She lived there alone, with her son Antoine and their dog Semillante, a big thin beast, with a long rough coat, one of the kind of animals that is used for guarding the herds. The young man took her with him when out hunting.

One night, after some kind of quarrel, Antoine Saverini was treacherously stabbed by Nicolas Ravolati, who escaped the same evening to Sardinia.

When the old mother received the body of her son, which the neighbors had brought back to her, she did not cry, but stayed for a long time motionless, watching him; then, stretching her wrinkled hand over the body, she promised him a vendetta.

She did not wish anybody near her, so she shut herself up beside

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the body with the dog, which howled continuously, standing at the foot of the bed, her head stretched toward her master and her tail between her legs. The dog did not move any more than did the mother, who was now leaning over the body with a blank stare, weeping silently.

The young man, lying on his back, dressed in his jacket of coarse cloth torn at the chest, seemed to be asleep; but he had blood all over him—on his shirt, which had been torn off in order to administer the first aid, on his vest, on his trousers, on his face, on his hands. Clots of blood had hardened in his beard and in his hair.

His old mother began to talk to him. At the sound of this voice the dog quieted down.

"Never fear, my boy, my little baby, you shall be avenged. Sleep, sleep—you shall be avenged, do you hear? It's your mother's promise! And she always keeps her word, you know she does."

Slowly she leaned over him, pressing her cold lips to his dead ones.

Then Semillante began to howl again, with a long, monotonous, penetrating, horrible howl.

The two of them, the woman and the dog, remained there until morning.

Antoine Saverini was buried the next day, and soon his name ceased to be mentioned in Bonifacio.

He had no brothers, no cousins—no man to carry on the vendetta. Only his mother thought of it, and she was an old woman.

On the other side of the straits she saw, from morning until night, a little white speck on the coast. It was the little Sardinian village, Longosardo, where Corsican criminals take refuge when they are too closely pursued. They comprise almost the entire population of this hamlet, opposite their native island, awaiting the time to return. She knew that Nicolas Ravolati had sought refuge in this village.

All alone, all day long, seated at her window, she looked over there and thought of revenge. How could she do anything without help—she, an invalid, and so near death? But she had promised, she had sworn on the body. She could not forget, she could not wait. What could she do?

She thought stubbornly. The dog, dozing at her feet, would sometimes lift her head and howl. Since her master's death, she often howled thus, as though she were calling him, as though her beast's soul, inconsolable, too, had also kept something in memory which nothing could wipe out.

One night, as Semillante began to howl, the mother suddenly got hold of an idea—a savage, vindictive, fierce idea. She thought it over until morning; then, having arisen at daybreak, she went to church. She prayed, prostrate on the floor, begging the Lord to help her, to support her, to give to her poor, broken-down body the strength

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she needed in order to avenge her son.

She returned home. In her yard she had an old barrel which served as a cistern. She turned it over, emptied it, made it fast to the ground with sticks and stones; then she chained Semillante to this improvised kennel.

All day and all night the dog howled. In the morning the old woman brought her some water in a bowl, but nothing more—no soup, no bread.

Another day went by. Semillante, weakened, was sleeping. The following day, eyes shining, hair on end the dog was pulling wildly at her chain.

All this day the old woman gave her nothing to eat. The beast, furious, was barking hoarsely. Another day passed.

Then, at daybreak, Mother Saverini asked a neighbor for some straw. She took the old rags which had formerly been worn by her husband and stuffed them so as to make them look like a human body.

Having planted a stick in the ground, in front of Semillante's kennel, she tied to it this dummy, which seemed to be standing up. Then she made a head out of some old rags.

The dog, surprised, was watching this straw man, and was quiet, although famished. Then the old woman went to the store and bought a piece of black sausage. When she got home, she started a fire in the yard, near the kennel, and cooked the sausage. Semillante, wild, was jumping around frothing at the mouth, her eyes fixed on the food, whose smell went right to her stomach.

Then the mother made a necktie for the dummy with the smoking sausage. She tied it very tightly around the neck, and when she had finished she unleashed the dog.

With one leap the beast jumped at the dummy's throat, and with her paws on his shoulders she began to tear at it. She would fall back with a piece of food in her mouth, then she would jump again, sinking her fangs into the ropes, and snatching a piece of meat would fall back again, and once more spring forward. She was tearing the face with her teeth, and the whole collar had disappeared.

The old woman, motionless and silent, was watching eagerly. Then she chained the beast up again, gave her no food for two more days, and began this strange exercise again.

For three months she trained the dog to this battle. She no longer chained her up, but just pointed to the dummy. She had taught Semillante to tear it up and to devour it without even hiding any food about the dummy's neck. Then, as a reward, she would give the dog a piece of sausage.

As soon as she would see the "man," Semillante would begin to tremble, then she would look up to

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her mistress, who, lifting her finger, would cry, "Go!"

When the widow thought that the proper time had come, she went to confession, and one Sunday morning she partook of communion with an ecstatic fervor; then, having put on men's clothes, looking like an old tramp, she struck a bargain with a Sardinian fisherman who carried her and her dog to the other side.

In a bag she had a large piece of sausage. Semillante had had nothing to eat for two days. The old woman kept letting the dog smell the food, and goading her.

They got to Longosardo. The Corsican woman walked with a limp. She went to a baker's shop and asked for Nicolas Ravolati. He had taken up his old trade, that of carpenter, and was working alone at the back of his store.

The old woman opened the door and called, "Nicolas!"

He turned around; then, releasing her dog, she cried, "Go, go! Eat him up!"

The maddened animal sprang for the murderer's throat. The man stretched out his arms, seized the dog, and rolled to the ground. For a few seconds he squirmed, beating the ground with his feet; then he stopped moving as Semillante dug her fangs into his throat and tore it to ribbons.

Two neighbors, seated before their door, remembered perfectly having seen an old beggar come out with a thin black dog which was eating something its master was giving her.

At nightfall the old woman was home again. She slept well that night.

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a NEW Miss Phipps story by

PHYLLIS BENTLEY

Miss Phipps, novelist-spinster-detective, is on the verge of a "breakdown" from overwork. She is placed in a private room in a hospital—and wouldn't you know it! Wherever Miss Phipps goes, crime is sure to follow . . . Are you a Dr. Kildare or Dr. Casey fan? Then you will get an "extra" pleasure from this story; for Phyllis Bentley, one of England's best-known regional novelists, gives us a fascinating, mosaically detailed, behind-the-scene view of a day's activities in a British hospital.

MISS PHIPPS IN THE HOSPITAL

by PHYLLIS BENTLEY

MISS PHIPPS AWOKE. RELUCtantly she opened her eyes, and groaned.

It was a pleasant enough room. A big window, open at the top and bottom, let in the warm summer air. The bed was comfortable, furnished with clean linen and large soft pillows. A bedside table and a cupboard held all the necessary equipment for an invalid, and several unread paperbacks. What more could she have asked for?

"Freedom!" exclaimed Miss Phipps passionately.

For this was a private room in a hospital in Brittlesea, where Inspector Tarrant and his wife Mary had firmly conveyed her for a month's rest after what they called Aunt Marian's "breakdown."

"It was not a breakdown," Miss Phipps had objected crossly.

"No—by coming in for a rest you avoided a breakdown," said the consultant whom the Tarrants had summoned. "Let's say, you were just tired out."

Miss Phipps snorted. But at the time she had not felt quite equal to arguing the point. So here she was, and here she had been for a fortnight, in this bright, comfortable room, in the care of innumerable (or so it seemed) kind but tyrannical nurses. At first there had been so many shapely arms and skillful hands, attached to so many different uniforms, caps, belts, each by their stripe or shape indicating a different level of qualification, that Miss Phipps, never one for hierarchy, had been hopelessly confused. However, she had now got them all pretty well sorted out.

There was Matron, large, majes-

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tic, awe-inspiring, who dropped in at unexpected moments and conversed intelligently about Miss Phipps's own detective novels. There was Sister Crowther, in charge: gray-haired, active, the fount of all wisdom, without whose permission no finger in the hospital might be lifted. There was the Night Sister, red-haired, green-eyed, witty, a trifle sharp of tongue. There was Nurse Smith, returned to her profession after some years' absence because of recent widowhood: middle-aged, quiet, sympathetic, gentle.

Then there were several young nurses and student nurses of varying types, all dedicated and conscientious; of these Miss Phipps had noticed particularly a really sweet child in her late teens, dark-haired, with delicious arms and deep blue eyes, who was at present on night duty, and a large jolly brown-haired girl, rather older, who appeared by day. Besides these, there were a couple of ward maids, and the man who came round with the newspaper trolley, and, of course, the consultant, and the Tarrants' family doctor, and the girls who took electrocardiographs and x-rays, and the television repair mechanic. The whole lot seemed to roll through her room in a continuous stream throughout the day.

For there were pills to be swallowed: pink pills, white pills, yellow pills—and, of course, meals and intermediary cups of coffee; temperature and pulse to be taken, baths and massage to be given; flowers brought in and removed; beds made; floors washed; and if any interval by chance occurred, a ward maid was bound to come in with a glass of water.

In fact, there was never a dull moment. To some patients this was no doubt agreeable, but to Miss Phipps, who was used to spending at least four hours every day at her typewriter, it was in the highest degree harassing.

"Come, come," she admonished herself. "Behavior under stress is a test of character. For the honor of your profession you must behave well."

She calmed herself, put on an affable smile, and rang her bell for early morning tea.

The hospital day proceeded as usual.

The sweet little nurse with the very blue eyes brought her tea, washed her hands and face, and tidied her bed.

"Would you like another pillow?"

"Well, if it's no trouble," said Miss Phipps apologetically.

"No trouble at all."

The pillow was brought before the little nurse went off duty. For a few moments Miss Phipps dozed peacefully.

The red-haired Night Sister, coming to have a look at her before going off duty, woke her up. A considerable strip of plaster adorned

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her handsome forehead; another crossed her right hand.

"I called in to see you last night when I came on duty, but you were asleep," the Night Sister said.

Miss Phipps blushed, for her sleep had been simulated to avoid more talk.

"You have hurt your head and hand?" she said, glad of the opening to change the subject.

"You heard nothing of the row? You weren't disturbed in the night?" asked the Night Sister. Miss Phipps shook her head. "Oh, my dear, that was a moment!" said the Night Sister, her green eyes gleaming. "I don't know whether I've mentioned it, but sometimes we have these low characters who come in at night and say they're ill—they do it to get a night's lodging, you know. We're obliged to take them in."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Miss Phipps.

"Yes. Well, last night we had one—a regular old tramp. Filthy as they come. He limped into the casualty ward and said he had something wrong with his leg. A rather young nurse who was on duty asked him a few questions and he resented it and began to storm about and yell. They sent for me and there he was, shouting and swearing and stamping about and brandishing his stick, and of course I went up to him to calm him down and he turned quickly and caught me one on the head with the stick."

"Abominable!" said Miss Phipps.

"Well, he didn't mean it, you know," said the Night Sister. "He'd had quite a bit to drink. As soon as he saw the blood flow, he burst into tears and behaved like a lamb. It was only a scratch."

"Poor old thing," said Miss Phipps.

"Poorer than you know, or than he knew," said the Night Sister. "He didn't really think there was anything wrong with his leg, you know—it turns out he's been limping about with a stick for a year or two. But there is, you know. Doctor hasn't seen him yet, but I expect we shall keep him in for an operation. He'll be here two months, I give you my word."

"Poor old thing," said Miss Phipps again. "I'm sorry about your head, Sister," she added hastily.

"Oh, it's all in the night's work," said the Night Sister. "And how are you this morning, Miss Phipps?" She embarked on clinical questions which Miss Phipps answered with reluctance.

It was no use trying to doze after the Night Sister had gone; there was no time. Pink pills and breakfast followed the Night Sister. Then came bath and massage at Nurse Smith's gentle hands. The bed was remade by Nurse Smith and Miss Brown Eyes. Flowers were brought in. Temperature and pulse were taken. White pills were administered.

Outside, the hospital gardener

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came, as always, punctually into view. He opened his shed, took out his wheelbarrow, and trundled it slowly toward the lettuces and cabbages. Miss Phipps gazed at him with heartfelt envy. To be out of doors! To be alone! The ward maid came in and began to wash the floor.

"You won't know me tomorrow, Miss Phipps, you won't indeed."

"Why not, Mrs. MacDermott?" asked Miss Phipps with a sigh. She did not in the least desire to know, but it was not in her nature to repel any friendly advance, and Mrs. MacDermott's Irish accent was at least pleasant to listen to.

"Sure and I'm having my hair permed this afternoon. You won't know me. It'll be all in waves like the sea. I shall look young and beautiful again. When I had my looks, you know, before he knocked me about so, I was quite a picture."

"I'm sure you were," agreed Miss Phipps.

"I dress very quiet now, Miss Phipps, and keep my hair in rat-tails, because I don't want him to come back to me. If I were to show a sign of beauty about me, he'd be back on the doorstep, and how could I keep him out? But I've had enough, Miss Phipps, I have indeed. That's what they said to me at the station—the police, you know—they said, you've had enough, Mrs. MacDermott, why don't you prefer charges? But I don't like to do that, Miss Phipps. After all, he's my husband, and Bridget's father."

"How is Bridget, Mrs. MacDermott?" inquired Miss Phipps wearily.

"Ah, she's well enough. She's a good girl, she is. 'Tis a pity she takes after her father in looks and not after me—it's plump she is, big and plump and not a very good skin. But she's a good girl, and very clever at her books. They're taking her at the Ursuline next term, you know, since she passed that exam."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Yes, indeed. I'm taking her to see them tomorrow, and that's why I'm having my hair done. I don't want her to be ashamed of her mother, you know, Miss Phipps."

"I'm sure she wouldn't be," said Miss Phipps.

"No, indeed! She's a good girl," said Mrs. MacDermott, wringing out her floorcloth. " 'I don't want to be a worry to you, mother darlin',' she says, 'I don't want tennis racquets or nothing of that sort,'—for my neighbor Mrs. Galway said, 'She'll have to have tennis racquets and all such at the Ursuline,' she said."

"She won't need a tennis racquet till next summer," began Miss Phipps.

"No, but there's other things, Miss Phipps, there is indeed. It'll be an expense for sure. That's what Bridget said, 'I don't want to be an expense to you,' she said, and she cried. Yes, that's God's truth, Miss

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Phipps; she cried, the tears rolled down her poor face, and she said, 'But if I can get my exams and get to be a teacher, you won't have to work no more. You shan't be a ward maid no more.' "

Miss Phipps felt a great inclination to shed tears herself. "You must be very proud of her, Mrs. MacDermott."

"Oh, I am indeed. Not that I mind being a ward maid, surely to goodness. Why should I? I like it and the pay's not bad and they value me here. 'Don't you be leaving us, Mrs. MacDermott,' that's what Sister said. 'We rely on you, we do indeed. You do your work thoroughly, Mrs. MacDermott, and we rely on you.' That's what Sister said."

"It was a great tribute," ventured Miss Phipps.

"Sure it is indeed. And it's a great thing for Bridget to be going to the Ursuline, don't I know that. All the same it will be a struggle, Miss Phipps. I think that's all the floor now. 'Tis a great whale of a floor, surely, twice the size of them up the other end. Goodbye to you now, Miss Phipps."

"Goodbye," said Miss Phipps, with an effort.

Mrs. MacDermott drew the door almost closed after her. Suddenly she put her head back into the room again and cried, "You'll not know me tomorrow with me head all curled!"

"Goodbye," murmured Miss Phipps feebly.

For a few blessed moments she drowsed.

"I've got it for you, Miss Phipps!" cried Mr. Bowie the newspaper man. He entered joyously, brandishing a highbrow weekly which Miss Phipps had asked him to procure for her.

"It's very kind of you—I'm greatly obliged, Mr. Bowie," said Miss Phipps. "Now with my usual dailies that will be—" She reached for her handbag which lay on the top of her bedside table, and paid him.

"Is there anything else you would like? I have quite a selection of reading matter on my trolley," said Mr. Bowie as he made change. "I could fetch in my trolley—yes, I'll fetch in my trolley."

He darted out, then re-entered pushing a large and many-shelved trolley which he maneuvered round various obstacles to Miss Phipps's bedside. Miss Phipps could not find it in her heart to snub such kindly eagerness, so she bought three paperback detective stories. She regretted having selected three, for she found she had not the exact sum required and was obliged to offer a note, for which Mr. Bowie could not provide the necessary change.

"Give me the change tomorrow," urged Miss Phipps, pressing the note upon him.

"Owe it to me till tomorrow,"

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urged Mr. Bowie, handing the note back.

"Tomorrow," repeated Miss Phipps, again tendering the note.

"Please, Miss Phipps," said Mr. Bowie, respectfully rejecting it.

Sighing, Miss Phipps gave in.

When the trolley was at last safely out of the room, Miss Phipps lay back, exhausted.

"The Doctor, Miss Phipps," said Sister Crowther reverentially.

Miss Phipps sighed and opened her eyes.

"What have I done to deserve such an angry look?" said the consultant playfully.

"You are not as good-looking as Dr. Kildare," snapped Miss Phipps.

"Ah, good. A better tone today, I think. More spirit," said the consultant cheerfully. He listened to Miss Phipps's heart from several positions.

In the distance a noise of voices arose. The consultant frowned, looked questioningly at Sister Crowther, then resumed his task. Sister Crowther remained calm, but compressed her lips slightly.

A timid knock came at the door; it opened and the frightened face of Miss Brown Eyes peeped in. Sister Crowther turned and glided from the room.

"Doctor," began Miss Phipps in a hurry, seizing her opportunity. "Look out at the garden! Look at the flower-bed!"

"We are hoping to build an extension out there shortly," remarked the consultant. "Being on the ground floor, level with the garden, makes this room very pleasant, I always think."

"Lettuces and cabbages are not exactly inspiring," complained Miss Phipps.

"But there's the flowerbed."

"Exactly. On the day I entered this hospital, I watched the gardeners planting those antirrhinums. They were then small green plants. Look at them now! Tall, bushy, in full bloom!"

"I don't quite take your point, Miss Phipps."

"How many weeks have I been here?"

"Ah! You wish to leave?"

"I want to *get out*," cried Miss Phipps, almost weeping.

"You have any complaints to make?"

"No, no! Everybody is the soul of kindness. They couldn't be kinder or more efficient. But I want to be free, I want to be outside in the world again."

"When you came in you were only too glad to surrender all responsibility and be cared for. You lay there in a hunched-up little heap, with not a word to throw to anyone. Today I see you—"

"Rampant."

"Rampant," agreed the consultant, smiling. "Well, shall we say next Wednesday?"

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" exclaimed Miss Phipps.

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Sister Crowther returned, looking harassed.

"I've just been saying to Miss Phipps, Sister," said the consultant tactfully, "that I think we might part with her next Wednesday."

Miss Phipps beamed.

"So she had better get up for a while this afternoon," pursued the consultant. "Clothes on, and sit in a chair."

Miss Phipps's smile vanished.

"Clothes on?" she faltered, suddenly uncertain whether or not she had the strength to pull a zipper.

"If you're to leave by Wednesday," said the consultant sternly. He then gave a somewhat impish look at the disconcerted Miss Phipps, and added, "Well, perhaps sit up in a dressing gown this afternoon. Clothes tomorrow, eh?"

"Thank you," said Miss Phipps meekly.

The hospital day proceeded—but not perhaps quite as usual. The brown-eyed nurse, serving Miss Phipps's luncheon, forgot the main course, left Miss Phipps to starve for half an hour, then appeared with dessert instead of fish. When she returned with the proper food, she had obviously been crying.

Mrs. MacDermott came in to fetch the luncheon tray with lips tightly buttoned, and went out without uttering a word. Remarkable!

Voices sounded in argument up the corridor; then a door closed and there was an ominous hush—a long pause in which nobody came in to see Miss Phipps. She began to wonder if some patient had suffered a relapse, or worse—but she did not like to ask. Indeed there was nobody in sight to ask. Miss Phipps began to feel quite pettish.

"Mary will be here soon," she consoled herself, and began to watch the clock. Mary Tarrant usually came at three.

Mrs. MacDermott came in with the telephone. Miss Phipps was glad to hear Mary's voice.

"Look, Aunt Marian, John says he can come with me this evening to see you, so I think I won't come this afternoon," said Mary. "I'll take Johnnie to the beach. Is that all right with you, dear?"

"Quite all right with me," said Miss Phipps staunchly, though her heart sank. "I shall be *very* glad to see Inspector Tarrant."

"Are you all right, Aunt Marian?" said Mary anxiously.

"Of course, dear."

"You sounded just a little bit—well, I'm not just sure how you sounded. A little unusual somehow."

"I'm coming out next Wednesday and I'm to sit up in a chair this afternoon!" cried Miss Phipps, putting on a joyous tone.

"Oh, that's splendid. Really splendid," said Mary, relieved. "I *am* glad. That *is* good news. Well, John and I will be with you this evening, as soon as I've put Johnnie

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to bed. We've got a sitter all arranged for."

"It's very sweet of you, dear," said Miss Phipps sincerely.

"There's Johnnie waking now—is there anything you want me to bring you?" said Mary hurriedly.

"No, thank you. Go to Johnnie!"

Mrs. MacDermott, silent as before, came in to remove the telephone.

"Well, I can have a nice sleep," thought Miss Phipps.

Sleep, however, did not come. At last, as dead silence continued and nobody came in, in a fit of impatience she rang the bell. To her alarm Sister Crowther appeared, looking grim.

"I'm sorry, Sister, I didn't mean to disturb *you*," faltered Miss Phipps.

"What can I do for you, Miss Phipps?" said Sister Crowther coldly.

"I'm to sit up for an hour this afternoon."

"Yes. Here's your dressing gown," said Sister.

She took the garment from its hook, assisted Miss Phipps from bed, inserted her into the dressing gown's folds, and arranged her in a chair with a cushion at her back. The chair was placed near the window.

"You can look out at the world," said Sister Crowther.

Miss Phipps felt miserable. Sister Crowther's actions were the skillful, comfort-bringing actions of the trained nurse. But where was the usual kindly smile, the affectionate touch, that feeling of warm security which Sister had given her before?

As the door closed, Miss Phipps tried to cheer herself by looking out at the hospital grounds, of which she now had a wider view than when she was lying in bed. But there was nothing very interesting to see. A side entrance, and a sweep of concrete path which apparently ran below the windows. Miss Phipps took up her highbrow weekly and turned its pages between listless fingers.

Suddenly Sister Crowther bounced into the room. This time she was no longer preoccupied; she directed a hopeful, searching gaze at Miss Phipps.

"Are you expecting visitors this afternoon, Miss Phipps?"

"No—the Tarrants are not coming till this evening."

"Matron would like a word with you," announced Sister Crowther. "Perhaps you had better get back into bed."

"Perhaps I had," agreed Miss Phipps weakly. She thought of asking whether she had done anything wrong. Was Matron perhaps insulted because Miss Phipps was anxious to leave the hospital? She was propped up on pillows, with Matron's starched and august presence filling the doorway, before she had time to frame the question.

"We have often spoken together of your detective stories, Miss Phipps," began Matron, seating

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herself. Sister Crowther stood respectfully at her elbow.

"Yes, I have enjoyed our discussions," said Miss Phipps, not knowing whether to feel relieved or not.

"Does the planning of detective fiction give you any skill in real-life detection, I wonder?"

"To some slight extent, I believe it does."

"Miss Phipps, a very unfortunate incident has happened," said Matron in her stately tones. "It must of course be reported to the hospital authorities. Though it is a small matter, it causes several members of the nursing staff to be under grave suspicion. I am much perplexed, and it occurred to me that if I confided the matter to you, you might be able to bring a professional technique to bear upon it, and enable me, if not to solve the mystery, at least to view it in an orderly fashion and pass judgment upon it in a rational style."

"I will do my best, Matron," said Miss Phipps soberly, reflecting that Matron already had an orderly view and a rational style all her own.

"Mrs. Hedgerley," began Matron, "a heart patient somewhat like yourself, occupies a room at the far end of the corridor. She is elderly, widowed, wealthy, accustomed to a good deal of attention from an unmarried daughter, and she is a very good customer of Mr. Bowie. You know Mr. Bowie?"

"Indeed I do. Mrs. Hedgerley reads a great deal, then?"

Matron glanced up at Sister Crowther interrogatively.

"Hardly *reads*," replied Sister. "Not in Miss Phipps's sense of the word. She turns the pages of a good many illustrated magazines."

Miss Phipps could not repress a slight snort.

"But she is very generous with these and circulates them to the other patients."

"The point is," said Matron stiffly, "that she pays Mr. Bowie quite a few shillings every morning."

"She's lucky to have the necessary change," remarked Miss Phipps, remembering her most recent transaction with Mr. Bowie.

"Ah, there we have the crux of the matter," said Matron. "Her daughter, Miss Hedgerley, brought her five pounds' worth of change yesterday evening for this very purpose. Mrs. Hedgerley placed this change, notes and silver, in her handbag. This morning, when Mrs. Hedgerley started to pay Mr. Bowie for her purchases, the money had disappeared."

"No! You mean, the handbag too?"

"No. The handbag was there, but the money was not in it."

"The money had slipped out, fallen behind something?" suggested Miss Phipps.

"A patient's room is not so lavishly furnished as to provide facilities of that kind, Miss Phipps."

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"And we have searched Mrs. Hedgerley's room *thoroughly*," said Sister.

Miss Phipps, having resided for a fortnight in Sister Crowther's charge, believed her.

"The daughter took the money home in her own handbag by mistake?" said Miss Phipps.

"No, Mrs. Hedgerley telephoned and checked with her daughter. So has Sister."

"She took it with her on purpose, perhaps," said Miss Phipps grimly.

"Miss Hedgerley has a senior post in a large bank," said Sister Crowther, "so that solution is highly improbable. Also, she had taken the numbers of the ten-shilling notes."

"Well, it's not a great sum after all."

"Wealthy people are often very determined not to lose small sums," said Sister Crowther drily. "That is one of the reasons they remain wealthy."

"It is impossible to retain staff who have committed theft," said Matron.

"And equally impossible to allow the innocent to remain under suspicion," flared Sister. "Excuse me, Matron."

"If the whole staff are under suspicion," began Miss Phipps soberly.

"Only those who entered Mrs. Hedgerley's room between her daughter's departure last night and the discovery of the loss this morning," said Matron.

"And those are?"

Matron looked at Sister Crowther, who said, "The night-duty staff did not visit her room during the night."

"As far as we know," said Matron.

"They were all together in the staff room at this end of the corridor, and alibi each other."

"Let us accept that for the present," said Matron.

"Student Nurse Towton answered Mrs. Hedgerley's bell first thing this morning and brought her morning cup of tea."

"That's the pretty nurse with the blue eyes," said Miss Phipps.

Matron nodded. Sister Crowther said rather stiffly, "Unfortunately she admits she picked up the handbag, which she says was lying on the floor when she entered the room."

"She's not a thief," said Miss Phipps with conviction. "Who else?"

"Night Sister entered twice—last night on coming on duty, and this morning just before going off duty."

"Impossible even to suspect her," snapped Miss Phipps.

"Student Nurse Bromwich, who helped to make Mrs. Hedgerley's bed this morning."

"The brown-eyed girl? As honest as the day, I'm sure. Who helped her with the bed? They always work in pairs, I've noticed."

"Nurse Smith."

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"Absurd," said Miss Phipps. "Who else?"

"Myself, of course," said Sister Crowther, very prim.

"Well, that at least is completely out of the question," said Miss Phipps, laughing. The other two made no response. Miss Phipps, rather daunted, inquired in a more subdued tone, "Who else?"

There was a pause.

"We had wondered whether Mr. Bowie," began Sister Crowther. "If he wheeled his trolley into the room, which he often does though it is not really permitted—"

"Surely that's most unlikely," said Miss Phipps. "How could he steal the money out of the handbag at the very moment when it was in Mrs. Hedgerley's hand so that she might pay him. Discovery of the theft would have been instantaneous."

"But," continued Sister Crowther, disregarding Miss Phipps's interruption, "when the loss was discovered he asked us to check his accounts and cash in hand. He had not that much—five pounds, I mean—in his possession."

"Concealed somehow on his person? Not that I doubt him for a moment," said Miss Phipps sincerely.

"He asked us to search him. We did so. He is definitely cleared."

"Is there anyone else?"

There was another pause.

"Mrs. Hedgerley," said Sister Crowther at length, "has permission to take baths in the bathroom instead of in bed. She was absent in the bathroom while Mrs. MacDermott was washing the floor of her room."

"No!" said Miss Phipps. "I just don't believe it! That good honest woman, who has struggled to bring up her daughter so well, in spite of a drunken brute of a husband. Never!"

Sister Crowther's expression warmed. "I agree—I agree entirely," she said. "Mrs. MacDermott has worked for us for years; she is above reproach."

"Unfortunately we know she is in need of money," said Matron.

"If you knew her as we do, Matron," said Sister Crowther pleadingly.

"I simply put the case as the Hospital Board will see it."

"People should not be suspected of dishonesty just because they are poor," said Miss Phipps.

"She had the motive and the opportunity," said Matron.

"Do you really mean you suspect her, Matron?" cried Miss Phipps.

"No. I believe Mrs. MacDermott to be in every way worthy of respect."

"Oh? Then why—"

"Until the thief is found, all are under suspicion."

"Mrs. Hedgerley's absence from her bedroom gave opportunity to all," said Miss Phipps thoughtfully.

"That is, to Mrs. MacDermott, Nurse Smith, Student Nurses Brom-

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wich and Towton, Night Sister, and Sister Crowther," said Matron. "During that time the other nurses and student nurses were all together in the sink room cutting down and refurbishing the patients' flowers. We need your help, Miss Phipps, in clarifying this painful problem."

"Let me think," said Miss Phipps.

Absolute stillness ensued. Miss Phipps found time to admire the self-discipline which training in nursing conferred on its recipients, while with another part of her mind she recollected carefully the details of the past night and day. One or two items rose up and claimed attention.

"Tell me more about Mrs. Hedgerley," she said at length. "Is she mournful and dowdy? Or with diamonds and blue curls?"

"Blue curls," admitted Sister Crowther with a smile.

"Likes good food, elegant bed wraps, open windows?"

"Exactly."

"Fussy about herself? Likes her blue night-light on all night?"

"Just so."

"Peevish?"

"Shall we say, petulant?" said Sister Crowther.

"Is her bedroom like mine?"

"Oh, no, Miss Phipps—yours is much larger; yours is the royal suite, you might say," said Sister Crowther. "Inspector Tarrant was most particular that you should have the very best room available."

"So Mrs. Hedgerley's room is much smaller. That rather surprises me. I should have thought she would like to have my room."

"She would. But it wasn't free when she came in. When it became free she couldn't make up her mind whether to move into it or not, and while she was hesitating, you came along. She's been rather bad-tempered and querulous about it ever since. Of course, your room is more expensive, Miss Phipps."

"So she's quite glad to have a grievance against the hospital, and will probably press this case to all lengths."

"We fear so," said Matron.

"Now what, Sister," pursued Miss Phipps, "is the position in Mrs. Hedgerley's room of the bed?"

"All the beds are arranged in the same position," said Sister Crowther. "That is, parallel to the window wall and the door wall, and halfway between them, with the head against the joining wall."

"I have a small table with a shelf on one side of my bed and a small cupboard with a flat top on the other."

"All the rooms are similarly furnished."

"The cupboard with the flat top is nearer to my door."

"It is so in all the rooms," said Sister Crowther.

"Hurrah!" said Miss Phipps. Matron and Sister stared at her in astonishment. "That is," she added hastily, "if Mrs. Hedgerley was accustomed to place her handbag on

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the shelf of the table *away* from the door. Was that so?"

"Yes," said Sister Crowther. "That was so. But—"

"Her handbag was therefore on the side of her bed nearer to the window?"

"Yes."

"What kind of handbag is it?"

"Large. White. Leather. Expensive."

"With a handle?"

"With a double handle—interwoven strips of leather."

"And in the morning Student Nurse Towton found it on the floor?"

"So she says."

"Closed?"

"Yes."

"Matron," said Miss Phipps, "last night an old drunken reprobate who limped was admitted to a man's ward in this hospital. He made a tremendous scene. Night Sister was called in to deal with him. She told me that he turned abruptly and accidentally struck her on the forehead and hand—struck her with a stick he was waving about."

"Do you doubt the story, Miss Phipps?" asked Matron.

"Heavens, no! I only want to know what kind of stick it was."

"I have no idea," said Sister Crowther.

"We can soon find out," said Matron. "Sister, inquire please."

"Perhaps we could borrow the stick for a few minutes," suggested Miss Phipps.

"His permission must be asked, of course," said Matron.

Sister Crowther left the room, looking perplexed.

"I think you see my drift, Matron," said Miss Phipps.

"I believe I do. Let us hope the stick has a crook."

"Exactly. The old man, quite drunk, entered the hospital grounds by the side gate—"

"Passed the windows, all open top and bottom—"

"Saw Mrs. Hedgerley's room, dimly lighted—"

"And the big white handbag on the shelf of the table, only three feet or so from the window—"

"Reached in with his stick, hooked the handle—"

"And drew the handbag out," Miss Phipps finished.

Matron compressed her lips. "He subjected innocent persons to suspicion, Miss Phipps."

"True. But he was drunk. And having removed the money, he returned the handbag."

"What of that?"

"The handbag was probably worth a good deal more than five pounds."

"Are you pleading for this dishonest old man whom you've never seen, Miss Phipps?"

"He was distressed when he found he had hurt the Night Sister. In her own words, he calmed down at once and behaved like a lamb. That shows a certain good feeling."

"In that case, she would probably

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be the best person to interrogate him."

"Undoubtedly. He can't have spent any of the money, and it will probably be in his bedside cupboard now."

"Let us hope so."

"Of course I may be entirely wrong," said Miss Phipps apologetically.

Sister Crowther burst into the room, carrying aloft a gnarled stick with a crook handle.

"Matron, he has confessed!" she gasped. "He has returned the money to me!" She drew notes and silver from her immaculate apron pocket.

"Our next problem," said Matron calmly, "is, I think, to persuade Mrs. Hedgerley to take a lenient view of his crime."

"Perhaps if you stressed his coming operation?" suggested Miss Phipps.

"Miss Phipps, we are most deeply obliged to you," said Matron. She rose with a rustle of starch.

"I am most happy to have been of service," said Miss Phipps, snuggling cosily into her pillows.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**FLETCHER FLORA**
TITLE:	***The Invisible Gauntlet***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Lieutenant Marcus
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*It was a tough case—the murder of Big Jim Shannon, political boss, a man with a thousand enemies. And not a single clue that could be called evidence . . .*

IT WAS EXACTLY EIGHT O'CLOCK one Thursday evening when Detective-Lieutenant Joseph Marcus rang the front doorbell of Conrad Vail's house on Dryden Road. It was after work hours, and Marcus made a point of being punctual; he had arranged his visit by telephone earlier in the day.

The door was opened by Vail himself. This was a nice personal touch that Marcus vaguely appreciated, but his appreciation was not excessive. He took the gesture, quite correctly, as simple recognition of his worth. The business on which he had come was something that might have pulled higher rank than his, but there was no one at headquarters who could handle it better, or even as well.

Vail, after an exchange of greetings, took him immediately down the hall and into the library. There was a small blaze in the fireplace at one end of the room, more for cheer than for comfort, and Marcus, relieved of his topcoat and hat, was put into a chair in front of the fire.

"I assume from the time that this visit is unofficial, Lieutenant," Vail said. "Will you have a drink?"

"No, thanks," Marcus said. "You have one, if you like."

"Not yet." Vail sat down in the other chair before the fire. "One

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strong highball just before bed—that's my limit."

Marcus, stretching his hands toward the flames, reflected that Vail's self-discipline was characteristic. Conrad Vail was a hard man. He could be, when necessary, a ruthless one. Until five nights ago, Saturday last, he had been a kind of major-domo in the political house of Big Jim Shannon. Now, after a series of lightning maneuvers, he was master of the house.

Big Jim was dead and buried. He had been found shot to death behind the wheel of his limousine in a dark, narrow street near the river. Someone—apparently a passenger in the car beside him—had held a .38 caliber gun against Big Jim's side and had fired one fatal shot into the great cage of ribs that held his heart. It was on this business that Lieutenant Marcus was now calling.

"You're a busy man," Marcus said, "so I won't waste your time. As you probably know, I've been working on the Shannon murder. The D.A. and the Chief have been giving out all the news releases, but I've been on the job."

"I know." Vail smiled thinly. "They make the noise, you do the work. Well, they couldn't have chosen a better man."

"Thanks. Anyhow, it's a tough case. Big Jim had a thousand enemies. It would take a year to round up everyone who had reason to wish him dead. Moreover, there's very little to go on. It's the hardest kind of case in the world to solve. Someone simply shot him and walked away—no witnesses, no clues, no anything."

"I can see that. Still, we can assume that it was someone Big Jim knew well enough to have with him in his car. Probably someone he trusted. That should narrow it down for you"

"Not if Big Jim had the gun on him all the while. Not if he was *forced* to drive down to that street near the river."

"That sounds logical in theory, but I can't buy it, Lieutenant. I knew Big Jim Shannon for years, ever since I came to him for a job when I was fresh out of law school. And nothing I know makes me believe he would have submitted to that kind of intimidation. He was a strong, contemptuous man, one of the last of a vanishing breed in city politics. Believe me, he would never have driven anywhere under the threat of a gun. He would have forced the issue wherever it began, whatever the consequences."

Marcus was glad to hear this, for it accorded perfectly with his own opinion. He had brought up the point only to have it refuted and cleared from his mind. Big Jim just didn't fit the picture of the murder. Contemptuous, Vail had called him, and it was an apt word. One of the last of a vanishing breed—an apt phrase.

Vail, on the other hand, was one

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of the new breed—just as hard, just as arrogant, just as ruthless in the exploitation of power, but operating under a surface of learning and polish. Anyone who doubted it had only to remember the swift and efficient way Vail had gathered into his own hands the complex of reins that Big Jim had dropped in the front seat of the limousine near the dark river.

"I welcome your judgment in the matter," Marcus said. "It clears the way for another idea I have."

"Oh? What idea?"

"I'll be interested to hear what you think of it. It's my notion that Big Jim Shannon did not drive to that street where his body was found. He was *driven* there."

"An interesting notion, but I don't see how you support it. He was found sitting under the wheel, although his body had toppled sidewise onto the seat. The wound was in his right side, with all the evidence indicating that it had been made by a gun fired from the seat beside him."

"True. But the wound could have been deliberately made that way to create that impression. In other words, Shannon could have been killed elsewhere and then taken to where he was found."

"Killed where?"

"I don't know. That's something we still have to determine."

"Is this just your imagination working, Lieutenant, or do you have any evidence?"

"Some. But nothing conclusive."

"Whatever it is, I'd like to hear it."

"Well, for one thing, the steering wheel. It had plenty of Big Jim's fingerprints on it, and many of them were quite clear. Yet he wasn't wearing gloves."

"He rarely did."

"So I understand. Anyhow, there were also some prints on the center braces of the wheel. You know how a man will often hold the wheel that way when he's driving. However, those prints were badly smeared. It was almost as if someone, wearing gloves, had grasped the braces in order to leave the prints on the wheel itself undisturbed."

"Clever, Lieutenant, but you'll have to admit, rather tenuous. Big Jim wasn't the only person who drove that limousine. His son used it, and occasionally his wife."

"Oh, I know. I admitted it was not conclusive."

"If you'll pardon my saying so, it's not even convincing. You'll have to come up with more than that."

"There is more. Not much, but a little. At any rate, I think you may find it more convincing."

"I'm perfectly willing to be convinced, Lieutenant. Try me."

"It's incredible, really. Assume for a minute that my idea is sound. Big Jim Shannon was killed somewhere else and driven by the mur-

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derer in Shannon's car to the place where it was found. His body was pulled into position behind the wheel to support the fiction that he was shot there by a passenger sitting next to him. Then the murderer walks away into the darkness, and no one can prove that it didn't happen exactly the way he had made it appear. Except for one thing. As his nickname implies, Shannon was a big man. He was six-feet-three. *But the driver's seat in the murder car was in the farthest forward position.* Big Jim could never have driven with the seat like that. He would have been intolerably cramped."

Conrad Vail was silent, evaluating this, and then he slapped his knees suddenly and stood up.

"You're right, Lieutenant! Leaving the seat in that position was a flagrant, blunder. As you said, it's really incredible."

"But fortunate for me. At least, I know that I am looking for a small man."

"Physically small, you mean."

"Do I? Perhaps I do."

"Yes. And you will no doubt want to get on with your looking. I won't keep you, Lieutenant. I'll be interested in seeing how successful you are."

"So will I."

"Can you let yourself out?"

"Of course. I know the way."

Conrad Vail retrieved Marcus' hat and coat, and held the coat while Marcus slipped into it.

"By the way, Lieutenant," he said, "I wonder if you would do me a service before you leave?"

"If I can."

"Just hand me that *Life of Napoleon* from the upper shelf there. I'm too short to reach it."

Having done the service, Lieutenant Marcus let himself out, figuratively carrying in his pocket the gauntlet that Vail had flung down.

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THE WASHINGTON PARTY MURDER

by A. H. Z. CARR

THERE WAS A MOMENT BEFORE Sarah Burton entered the room when she regretted having come. All the cocktail sounds—the too-much laughter, the high-pitched voices, the thin chiming of ice against glass—struck at her nerves as she paused before the mirror in the foyer for a last mechanical inspection of her outward self. What she hoped to see, and saw, was a cool mask—the expression faintly amused, the gray eyes calm, the high forehead placid under the curling darkness of her hair, with its absurdity of a hat. She felt disguised—as if the hat, the weather-tanned face, and the slim black dress were painted lies.

"Sarah, my dear!" Ethel Cheever's ring-encrusted hand pressed hers, and Sarah smiled through a gush of greeting. "I was so surprised when you phoned, and so glad. Everybody will be delighted. Jerry and I were wondering just this morning when you were coming back."

The hostess-voice dropped abruptly to a womanly murmur, and Mrs. Cheever sadly shook her aging head, with its incongruous pile of bright red hair, as she squeezed Sarah's hand with a different warmth. "Oh, my. What can I say about Tom? It's almost six months and I still cringe when I think about it."

Mrs. Cheever's charm flowed

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again with the practice of years of gentle hypocrisy, as if a faucet had been turned. "You're looking well, Sar. Do you like my wig? Absurd, isn't it? Still, at my age it's rather fun being absurd. And it has practical value at parties. My guests can always find me. Can you stay for the late buffet?" The abruptness of the question caused Sarah to hesitate, and Mrs. Cheever rushed on. "Since you left I've acquired a new prize—Pilang, my second chef—he does marvelous Oriental dishes—everyone loves them. But of course you've been out there, so they won't surprise you. How I envy you—young and able to go everywhere and see everything and ask politicians embarrassing questions, and see your name in print all the time."

Mrs. Cheever barely paused. "Still, Jerry and I did have the most wonderful winter. In Pataguaya. Jerry has this fabulous ranch down there, did you know? We hadn't been there in years. But now that his old friend General Silvestre is back in power—my dear, the way we were entertained! You've no idea what these Latins can do to make one happy! The only trouble was, the climate was wrong for my asthma. My nights were just one long wheeze, and I practically lived on adrenalin. But I mustn't hold you here talking. There must be so many people you want to see. Oh, here's Barbie. Don't you think she's looking pale? Barbie, Sar's back."

Sarah greeted the Cheevers' granddaughter, a tall, blonde girl of perhaps nineteen, who might have been beautiful if her manner had been less languid and her expression less bored. Her eyes lighted a little as she came toward Sarah.

"A human face!" the granddaughter exclaimed. "Actually someone I'm glad to see. Where did you get that lovely tan? Let's you and me go somewhere out of this mob—they make even the girls at school seem exciting by comparison. I vowed last autumn I was through with Grandma's parties, but here I am."

"Barbie!" said Mrs. Cheever, laughing. "I don't mind your being rude to my guests, but must you call me Grandma? Whatever these colleges teach nowadays, it isn't manners." Her voice sharpened a trifle as she added, "Is that a fresh martini I see in your hand?"

The girl looked at the glass as if she had never seen it before. "Yes, Ethel, I do believe it is." Turning to Sarah, she said, "Please talk to me when you get a chance. This place is full of elderly lechers and if I'm not careful I may throw a drink at a general or a senator or a mother or somebody."

As Barbie wandered off, Mrs. Cheever shook her head. "That child! It's her spring vacation—she's staying with us because she and her mother are on the outs. Nickie's around here somewhere. They feel so competitive——I think that's

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wrong for a mother and daughter, don't you? But girls today are *so* difficult. I never know what Barbie's going to say next. She's suffering from a blighted love affair just now and it makes her seem hostile, but she's really a good girl, you know. And a lovely figure, don't you think? Taller than her mother and without that oversized bosom."

Sarah waited for an opportunity to say, "Is Kirk Norwin here?"

"Somewhere around. Do you want him particularly? I'll try to find him for you. Such a crowd—must be two hundred today."

As they stood at the entrance of the great salon, a number of olive complexions and vivid uniforms caught Sarah's eye. From the garden beyond came strains of Spanish-American music plucked from a clever guitar. Ethel Cheever said, "We're still stressing Latin relations." By "we" she managed to convey the Cheevers and the government of the United States; she regarded herself, if no one else did, as unofficial hostess for the Department of State.

If Mrs. Cheever's famous weekly "At Homes" were not actually an asset to American diplomacy, still they provided relaxation for a good many V.I.P.s in Washington, and who but Ethel Cheever could have afforded them? She was wearing one of her much-publicized costumes—tight trousers that emphasized the slimness of her legs, and a long loose jacket that concealed the less creditable parts of her anatomy—both garments made of shimmering gold cloth that reflected every point of light like burnished armor.

Her bright little eyes, darting around the busy room, came to rest. "There he is with the Attorney General. Always leave it to Kirk to be with the biggest name at a party. I suppose he's still in love with you. Are you going to marry him?"

Sarah accepted the question without surprise, and said simply, "No."

"Too bad," sighed Ethel. "It would make such amusing gossip. You might do worse, Sar. Did you know he has resigned from the State Department? He's going back west to run for the Senate. So ambitious. Jerry thinks he'll make it. Considering how long he's wanted you, don't you think you owe him something? Don't bother to answer, it's just my fun. But Sar, before we go in, I ought to warn you, some of the talk about you hasn't been kind."

Sarah looked at her blankly. "I mean," Ethel Cheever went on, "about your not coming back for Tom's funeral. People said that you and Tom were on the verge of splitting up when you went away."

"That's not true, Ethel."

"Of course, but you know how Washington loves to gossip. I've heard remarks that you were through with him because—you mustn't mind this, dear—because of my daughter-in-law."

"Nickie?" Sarah almost smiled. "Ethel, Tom and I loved each other.

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The thing between him and Nickie was over before we married."

"Truly, Sar? We all saw them with our own eyes, you know—I mean that evening in the garden."

"Yes, I remember only too well. Tom got tight that night, and Nickie seized her opportunity and kissed him where people would be sure to see. I was furious with him, naturally, but we had all that settled and out of the way before I left on my trip."

Ethel sighed and shook her head until the pouches under her eyes quivered. "Oh, my, what a shame! I don't mean about Nickie—everybody knows she's a bandit where men are concerned. Why she had to marry my son—oh, well. But I'm sorry we didn't know about—I mean, when you weren't even at the funeral service—" She let her voice trail off.

After a moment Sarah said evenly, "When the cable came about Tom, I had just gone into a hospital in Damascus with a broken collarbone and miscellaneous bruises. I got caught in the middle of the anti-American riots and they turned my car over, with me in it."

"Why, Sar! We missed that completely."

"It didn't get into the papers. I was after a hot story and had a better chance of getting it if I didn't stir up a fuss. Then the cable about Tom arrived. I got out of bed, fell, knocked the collarbone out again, and went into a state of shock—at least, so they told me afterward. When I got my wits back, I was in bed running a high fever. One of the Syrian doctors cabled my paper asking if the funeral could be postponed until my return. They cabled back that in cases of tetanus prompt cremation was advisable, and would I object if a service was held at the same time, that Kirk had suggested it, and that another service could be held when I got back. So I cabled them to go ahead."

"Oh, my," said Ethel. "That just goes to show! The only news we had about you was from your newspaper. They just said they were in touch with you, and you weren't able to return just then. And here we all were, thinking you were being bitter." Diamonds sparkled and there was a faint jangling of jeweled bracelets as she waved a hand in a rueful arc. "But Sar, once you were out of the hospital, why didn't you come right back? Surely you must have had all kinds of things to attend to. Practical things."

"The practical things, the will and all that, Tom's syndicate looked after for me. Under the terms of his contract with them, the rights to his column and all his files reverted to them, so I had no responsibility in that quarter. What was there to come back for? My paper wanted me to stay abroad on a roving assignment, and I wanted to work. I needed to get hold of myself, completely, before returning. You can understand that." Sarah found her-

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self sounding defensive and with a little frown of annoyance she came to an abrupt stop. "I wonder if we can catch Kirk's eye," she said.

"Oh," said Ethel, "we can do better than that." She raised her resonant voice. "Kirk!"

A powerfully built young man with a prematurely lined face turned, murmured an apology to the gentleman with whom he had been talking, put down his glass and came swiftly toward them. "Sar! So you made it." He took both her hands in his.

"See that she gets a drink, Kirk. I'll find Jerry. He'll be so glad to see you, Sar." Ethel swirled away, her flaming wig a beacon.

"Your cable didn't say which plane, or I'd have been at the airport," Kirk said.

"There was no reason to bother you. I phoned Ethel and came right over as soon as I'd changed."

His survey of her was complete and thoughtful. "You're thin. Your face looks — taut. Almost chiseled. But as lovely as ever. I like the way you've done your hair. Is that what they call the Poetic Upsweep?"

She appeared not to have heard. "Kirk. Last week, when I got to Hong Kong, there was a letter waiting for me. From Tom."

"From Tom!" He stared incredulously.

"Yes," she said quietly. "He wrote it just a day or two before he died. It had been following my trail for months, all the way across Asia. I guess I never stayed anywhere long enough for it to catch up with me."

Kirk waited in silence, a slight frown puckering his forehead. She went on, "He said he was on the track of a story involving a friend of ours—something that was going to be painful—and not to be surprised when the news reached me."

After a moment's pause Kirk said, "Did he name the friend?"

"I'll let you decide that for yourself. When I put his letter together with—with what happened to him —it made me wonder."

"I know." He looked at her steadily. "I've had a suspicion or two myself."

"You did! Why didn't you let me know?"

"I had no facts. Just a—a doubt." His frown deepened, until he seemed to be staring at her almost angrily. "Besides, I didn't think you would want to be bothered."

"Oh, Kirk, you too?"

"Well, can you blame me? Your letters when you finally wrote were —crisp, cool, and businesslike would be the right adjectives, I think."

She winced. "Again and again I tried to write you what I felt. But each time nothing came out except —words. Until I just gave up. What was there to say? I loved Tom and he was dead. Full stop."

He passed his hand fretfully through the youthful thatch of brown hair that contrasted oddly with his serious face.

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"What brought you back now? Tom's letter?"

She considered her reply. "I could never quite grasp what really happened that night. In the clipping the paper sent me, it just said he had scratched himself on rose thorns in the Cheevers' garden and contracted tetanus. I couldn't understand why he didn't receive treatment in time, but I had to accept the facts. I just felt—empty. Yet there was always a question in the emptiness. And when his letter came—all at once—" She hesitated.

"You think it wasn't an accident," he said flatly.

"I just want to be sure."

"What can you hope to learn at this late date?"

"I don't know. But I must try to find out what happened. I must!" Her voice had risen; a face or two turned toward them, and he put his hand on her arm. "I thought if I came here, it would give me a chance to see everybody at the same time. Will you help me?"

"Of course I will. If there is anything we can do. Frankly, I wouldn't know where to start. I've thought about this thing for nights on end, and I've had certain ideas. But as for proving anything—" He shrugged. "Where is Tom's letter?" he said. "We might begin with that."

"I've got it with me." She touched her small black purse. "I'll show it to you later."

Hands fell on her shoulders, and a voice behind her boomed, "Welcome home, Sarah Burton." A big, handsome, white-haired man, wearing slacks and an odd jacket, put a not quite avuncular arm around her and kissed her cheek.

"Hello, Jerry," she said, smiling. "Now, what is it you're going to show Kirk? I heard you. Nothing you wouldn't show me, I hope?" The heartiness of his laughter was unfeigned—a small boy's infectious delight in his own humor.

"A letter from Tom," Sarah said, ignoring Kirk's instant frown.

Jerry Cheever's face sobered instantly. "Sarah," he said, "I can't tell you how this thing has shocked and hurt me." He shook his massive head sadly.

"I'd like to talk to you, Jerry, when you get a chance," she said.

"Of course, any time. But look here, you need a drink. Let me see, it's still Scotch, isn't it?"

Kirk chuckled. "The greatest memory in the world for what people drink."

"Don't make fun of it, my boy. When I was an ambassador, that was my chief asset, next to Ethel's money. Besides, in a bourbon-drinking house a Scotch drinker always stand out."

He beckoned to one of the servants circling the room, took a glass from a loaded tray, and handed it to Sarah. "We're still in the same old social squirrel-cage, you see," he went on, looking around the great room with an air of amused cyni-

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cism. "I don't know why we keep doing this sort of thing."

"I've always expected you to be called in by the White House for a cabinet job or something," said Sarah.

"Not a chance," Cheever replied cheerfully. "Ethel continues to hope, but for some reason I'm *persona non grata* to the boys higher up. I don't know why, exactly. Kirk could probably tell me—the State Department knows everything, but you might as well try to open a sardine can with a paper clip. Besides, candidly, what do I have to offer? Ethel's millions? They've got plenty of rich men. No, I'm not kidding myself. We live this way just because we're used to it, we like it. Especially Ethel. In a way, it's her life. If she can't make political headlines through me, she can at least keep hitting the society pages with drinks on the house." He laughed and shrugged at the same time.

A woman standing nearby spoke to Kirk and held him in conversation. Sarah sipped her drink and said, "Jerry, do you think we could talk now?"

"Now? You mean this instant?" He looked at her curiously.

"I know it's the wrong time," she said, "but I can't help it. It may be my only chance. I've got to know, Jerry. Was there anything that struck you as mysterious about Tom's death?"

"Mysterious? No." After an instant he repeated, "No."

"Will you tell me exactly what happened? Can we go somewhere?"

"Well—certainly, if you wish."

"If it isn't too awkward for you."

He grinned. "Leaving a party with a pretty girl has never been awkward for me. Sometimes it's been awkward for the girl."

As they moved away, Kirk looked at Sarah, and she murmured, "Later."

Cheever, pretending to misunderstand, mocked himself with a sigh. "Ah, youth. Twenty years ago—or thirty—a fellow like Kirk wouldn't have a chance with you. Not with me around. I'd have given you something to think about, believe me."

He took her by the arm and steered her across the room. "Don't let my nonsense bother you. I'm learning to grow old, if not gracefully, at least realistically. As the elderly Scotchman in the train compartment said to the nervous young girl, 'Dinna worry, lassie. Drinkin's ma hobby.'"

A woman wearing a vivid print dress and exotic earrings caught Sarah by the arm in passage. "Sar, darling! You're back, and you never let me know. Ought I to be offended?"

"Not very, Nickie," Sarah said. "I just got in today."

Nickie, without listening, said, "You have Paris written all over you. Clothes, freedom, amour."

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"That's nice," said Sarah, "especially since I just got back from Asia, where I bought no clothes, found no freedom, and experienced no amour."

"But you look so—so different," Nickie said, waving her martini recklessly. Her intensely blue eyes were a little glassy as they examined Sarah feature by feature, with clinical interest. She was a flamboyant blonde with a bust that pushed itself into the consciousness like a blare of trumpets. "Yes, you look so—new."

"Dry cleaned, if you mean the dress. How is Fred, Nickie?"

Abruptly, Nickie dropped her voice to a sad note. "I have changed, too. Everybody says I've developed a haunted look."

Sarah laughed. "You still have that wonderful gift of never listening to anything that anyone else says."

"I don't think anyone should ever try to listen to anyone else at cocktail parties. It's too wearing. Don't you see it?"

"See what?"

"The change in me. In my eyes."

Sarah peered at the pretty face, untouched at nearly forty years, and said with sudden irritation. "Now, Nickie. The only thing that ever haunted your eyes was the memory of the night before."

"Oh," said Nickie thoughtfully, "that is probably unkind. You know Sar, I do believe your tongue is your worst enemy. I don't mind, really, but for your own sake, if you see what I mean."

"Yes, I see. But you know how it is with a tongue," Sarah said. "It has a life of its own."

She glanced at Cheever, who stirred uneasily. "Nickie," he said, "who is that tall fellow in the general's uniform? I can't think of his name."

Nickie merely smiled at him briefly before saying to Sarah, "Of course, people like Jerry and Kirk say you are very witty, and I suppose you have to live up to that. Poor Tom used to think so, too, but I'm sure it must be very allergic for any man to listen to that kind of thing day in and day out."

With her voice under careful control Sarah said, "You mean that Tom found life with my alleged wit unbearable?"

The tone of the words held Nickie to the question despite herself. "Oh, no," she said, taking a small step backward. "You're reading things in, Sar."

The movement, with its faint suggestion of physical fear, was more infuriating than the reply. Nickie went on with renewed gaiety, as if still in the first moment of greeting. "I really am glad you're back. Everybody has missed you, and every time I passed your little house and saw the shutters on the windows, I thought of you having a fling in Paris and Rome. I don't blame you. I would have done the same thing myself. A woman can't

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be expected to stay in mourning forever."

Cheever waved an exasperated hand. "Hold it, Nickie. You and Sar can talk later. She and I have things to discuss."

"Very well," said Nickie, "but if you're going to talk about Tom, be sure to tell her why he was drinking so much that night."

She tried to turn away, but Sarah caught her by the shoulder, not gently. "No, I must hear that," she said. "Nickie, why was Tom drinking?"

There was a flash of anticipation in the blue eyes, and Sarah sensed the imminence of a strike against which she would need all her defenses. She brought her glass to her lips as Nickie said reproachfully, "Oh, Sar. Getting him to marry you, and then running off to the ends of the world, and leaving him dangling. Of course, he needed consolation. The poor boy. I was so sorry for him when I saw him drinking again. And I was the one who found him."

With an effort Sarah repressed every response except the essential question. "Found him? Where did you find him?"

"Why, under the rosebushes, when he passed out. Arturo and I."

Sarah looked at Jerry. "Arturo?"

"Arturo Olivarez. I'll tell you about it," Cheever said angrily. "Come along." Nickie turned away with a pretty toss of her head.

"Pay no attention," Cheever muttered as he and Sarah moved on. "If she wasn't my daughter-in-law—well, I've told Fred flatly that he ought to discipline her or divorce her, but he doesn't seem to have the gumption to do either. Probably as a doctor he hates the thought of a scandal. Prefers not to know. But she even steals men from her own daughter. Most people regard her as a light comedy in one act, but she's been a tragedy to Fred. I suppose like everyone else you've guessed why he married her in the first place. He was just twenty-one. Oh, well. Come this way."

Cheever opened a door, and they walked down a picture-lined corridor to a large leather-and-mahogany study, with a pristine, seldom-used look. "Sit down," he said, and they settled into deep leather armchairs. He followed her glance at the rows of impressively bound books and the small, dark-hued paintings on the wall.

"Don't mind this room. Something that Ethel and the decorator worked out. Makes me feel as if I were wearing a false beard. But it's a quiet place to talk." He offered her a cigarette, and when she refused, lighted one for himself, studying her face through the smoke. "There's a dangerous look about you. A sort of brooding concentration. As if only one thing in the world matters."

"That's perceptive of you, Jerry," she acknowledged. "For months I've been knotted up with the feel-

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ing that somehow, I didn't know how, I was letting Tom down. Then, just last week, I got a letter that he wrote me before his death—and all at once I knew what I had to do. Since then I've hardly thought of anything else."

For a moment he did not reply. Through an open window came the murmur of voices in the garden against the soft strumming of guitars. She knew the tune—a gentle sad song that she had heard years before in Argentina—*Juventud Perdida*, Lost Youth . . . *Tell me, then, where has my young beloved gone?*

"I've got to ask you," said Cheever. "Is it true that you and Tom were having—well, let's say, a rough time before you went off on your trip?" As her eyes widened, he hastened to add, "Don't get me wrong. Tom was crazy about you—everybody knew that. But we got the impression that you were angry with him."

"Angry! I was furious! After he got tight here and made a fool of himself with Nickie, I didn't talk to him for a week. I was being compulsively female. Tom understood that and when he promised to cut down on his drinking, we made up. We loved each other, Jerry. We were planning a trip together, just for fun, as soon as I got back from my Syrian assignment. I was going to give up my job, stay in Washington, and raise a family."

"That makes me feel better," said Jerry. "Damned tongues wagging, you can't separate rumor from fact around here. What about this letter from Tom? Would it be indiscreet for me to ask what it said?"

She looked at the little handbag reflectively. "He was upset, because he was going to have to make trouble for a friend, someone he liked. He didn't say who."

"And you think his death was somehow mixed up with that? That there was—well, some kind of funny business?"

"Funny business?" She thought about the phrase. "I'm just trying to get it all straight in my mind."

He took a long pull at his cigarette and let the smoke out slowly. "A man like Tom, writing the kind of behind-the-scenes column that he did, and knowing all the secrets he must have known about a lot of people, was bound to have enemies. But I think you ought to know that his syndicate sent a man over to see me. He went into the whole thing thoroughly, and when he was all through he agreed with the doctor. An accident, leading to a natural death."

Sarah said, "I suppose that must be so. And yet—tetanus, Jerry. Nobody in America dies of tetanus any more. Not if there's a doctor around."

A wry smile twisted his lips. "When I was a boy they called it lockjaw, or blood poisoning, and lots of people died of it. Kids particularly. They'd scratch themselves and

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forget about it, and infection would set in. That was before the antitoxin was generally available."

When she said nothing his tanned jowly face crinkled into an unhappy grimace. "The tetanus bacilli were in our garden, all right. It seems you often find them in natural fertilizer. That's what our gardener uses especially for the rosebushes. Matter of fact, he had a mild case himself a while back. But they shot the antitoxin into him in time."

"Didn't they, into Tom?"

"Yes. At least, it should have been in time. But he had a very bad case, as it turned out."

"Tell me about it, Jerry. Please. Just as it happened. Everything. Every detail you can remember."

"I'll try, Sar. Let's see. That evening there were fewer than usual —only about a hundred people. A lot of South Americans. Anyway, Tom was drinking pretty heavily." Sarah stirred restlessly. "Does that surprise you?" he said.

"It does, rather. After his promise. He didn't make promises lightly."

"He missed you pretty badly, I guess."

"Surely not to the point of breaking his word. After all, he wasn't a serious drinker. He could always stop when he chose."

"Still, that night he must have taken on quite a load. I saw him at the bar, and he wasn't himself. When I asked him if he was feeling all right, he said, 'Okay,' but his voice was thick."

For an instant her teeth bit at her full lower lip. "Tom always hated admitting he wasn't well—or sober. But did you actually see him take more drinks than usual?"

"Well, no. I wasn't watching him, of course. But it seemed obvious, at the time."

"What was he drinking?"

He looked surprised. "As far as I know, his usual. Bourbon and water. I suppose he stuck to that."

"Was anyone else at the bar? With him, I mean?"

"Oh sure, at one time or another, lots of people. I remember seeing Kirk with him, and Arturo Olivarez. And later Nickie. Ethel broke that up. Afterward she told me she thought Tom was hitting the booze pretty hard, why didn't I tactfully suggest a little fresh air? So I asked him if he'd like to walk around the garden with me and look at the flowers. The last of the season, I told him. The only trouble was there was no moon that night—it was black outside.

"He wasn't too tight to see through me. He said not to bother—he'd rather see the flowers alone just then. He looked a little green, and I figured he was going to be sick and preferred to be by himself, so I didn't insist. I noticed he staggered a little as he went through the glass doors, and I remember thinking that was the only time I'd ever seen Tom unsteady on his pins."

Sarah looked out of the window at the sunlit garden. It reminded

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her of a Dufy painting—the bright blue of the sky reflected in the lily pool, the brilliant floral borders, the satin-smooth creeping lawn, the gay costumes of the strolling guests. Along one side of the enormous garden and at the far end, against a high brick wall, ran a long line of gigantic climbing rosebushes, showing their early blooms in vivid reds, with splashes of yellow and white.

Presently Sarah said, "There are fewer pinks than there were last year, aren't there?"

He chuckled. "That's my Sarah. The eye of the demon reporter doesn't miss a trick. Yes, Ethel has developed a passion for white roses, and she has replaced the pinks. She says that pink is a weak compromise."

"Jerry. Do you happen to remember exactly what time Tom went into the garden?"

"I can't be sure," Cheever said reflectively, "but it was latish. People were leaving and there was supper for those who stayed. I was busy saying goodbye and making sure our new chef, Pilang, had everything he needed. That was our first all-Indonesian buffet. A great success. Anyway, it must have been ten o'clock when Kirk asked me where Tom was, and I realized he hadn't been at supper. I said I had last seen him going into the garden.

"Well, Kirk went out to look for him. There was something they had to talk about, he said. A few minutes later he came back and said Tom wasn't there, and we agreed he'd probably gone home without bothering to say good night."

Sarah wrinkled her forehead. "How was it that Kirk didn't see him and Nickie did?"

"It was pretty dark, and it's a big garden. Kirk could have easily missed a dark suit in the shadows. But Nickie and Arturo—" He let a smile finish the sentence.

"You mean they stumbled over Tom? That he was unconscious?"

"That's it. He evidently passed out there."

She closed her eyes for a moment and tried to capture the scene as it must have been—the two figures embracing in the shadowed garden, the reluctant parting, the contact of a foot with the unseen body in the rosebushes, the discovery. She asked, "Who is Arturo?"

"Oh, of course. You never met him. Arturo Olivarez. He arrived in Washington just about the time you left. Sent up here by the revolutionary Pataguayan government—the one that lasted such a short time. Personally a nice fellow, although I didn't like his politics. Radical. But good-looking. Barbie had a thing about him." He chuckled. "She used to come down from school weekends to date him. Thought we didn't know. Ethel and I talked about it with Fred and decided not to interfere. Fact is, we liked him."

"Did he know Tom?"

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"Yes, they seemed quite friendly. I saw them together having lunch at the Metropolitan Club, just a few days before—" He stopped.

"And after he and Nickie found Tom?"

"Nickie came rushing into the house and whispered to me. I went out with her and helped Arturo with Tom. He came to, and we sat him up, but he was in very bad shape, hardly able to talk. We didn't want anyone else to see him—you can imagine the gossip. It was bad enough having Nickie know, that chatterbox, but I cautioned her. Arturo and I finally got Tom to his feet."

"Could he walk?"

"Not very well—not at all, really. We had to carry him, more or less. Two hundred pounds of man is something to hold up, believe me, when his legs don't work right, but we brought him into the servant's wing, and got him on a couch in one of the rooms. He looked really sick to me, and Fred was at the party, so I sent Arturo to get him. Pretty soon Fred came along. He struck me as having had one too many himself, but he looked at Tom, felt his pulse, smelled his breath, said he was drunk, and advised me to let him sleep it off. He noticed that Tom's forehead was scratched, and he got some antiseptic out of the bathroom and bathed the scratches."

"Didn't Tom speak?"

"A little, yes. He mumbled something—he was sorry, didn't know what had happened. Just to let him alone and he'd be all right. His voice was blurry and he could hardly keep his eyes open. He didn't notice, and neither did anyone else, that he had a deep scratch on the forearm, above the wrist. Those old bushes have big thorns, you know. That scratch was evidently where the tetanus started."

Her effort of concentration was almost like a sound in the room. "No one noticed the scratch on his arm?"

His glance at her was compounded of several emotions—annoyance, perhaps, at the endless questions, admiration of her persistence, amusement at the contrast between the delicate feminity of her figure and the determination of her approach.

"Why, Sarah," he said lightly, "your name ought to be Diana. I can see you now with your bow, your quiver, and your arrows, poised on a pedestal. The hunting goddess, lovely and implacable. In marble."

"There are times," she acknowledged, "when I feel I have been turned to marble."

He said, "You really loved him."

"Yes," she said. "All the way."

"Poor kid. I'm sorry, Sar."

Her thin hand made a little gesture of friendly understanding. "Forgive me, Jerry. You're being very patient with me. I won't keep you much longer. We were talking about the scratch."

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"The scratch," he repeated. "No, we didn't notice it—none of us. His coat sleeve concealed it. Never occurred to anyone to look. We simply put a blanket over Tom and left him where he was, rather than carry him to a guest room and let others see him in that condition. I'd had a bit to drink, too, and slept late next morning. That was a Saturday. It wasn't until about ten o'clock, while I was having coffee, that I suddenly remembered Tom.

"I went to his room and he was gone. Clifton, our butler, said he had got up early and called for a taxicab. Clifton said he looked very poorly. Later that morning I rang Tom up at your house and asked how he was feeling. His voice seemed much better. He apologized for having been a nuisance, and said he didn't realize he'd had so much to drink—his head seemed big as a balloon. He said he must have caught the rheumatics out in the garden—that his joints and his neck were stiff as stale taffy—you know how he liked to use the old farm lingo."

She nodded slowly. "He didn't mention the scratch on his arm?"

"No, not then. Later, when Ethel came along, I told her what had happened. She was concerned—said Tom could have caught his death of cold lying out there in the damp garden, and that I ought to drop in to see him during the day. I was playing golf at Burning Tree that afternoon, and on the way back I drove through Georgetown and stopped at your house. Your maid answered the bell and said that Mr. Burton wasn't feeling well and didn't want to see anybody, but I went upstairs and there he was, stretched out on the bed, looking feverish. His neck was getting stiffer, he said. He hadn't wanted to call the doctor, but he guessed he had better."

"But what about the scratch on his arm?"

"Yes, I'm coming to that. I noticed that he kept feeling his right forearm, and when I looked I saw that it was inflamed and swollen around a deep scratch. He said he had put antiseptic on it that morning, but it hadn't done much good."

He took a deep breath, as if wearied by the strain of remembering. "By that time I recognized the gardener's tetanus symptoms—fever, stiff neck, inflammation—so I didn't waste any time. I knew that Tom and Fred didn't exactly love each other, so I asked him if he'd like me to call his own physician and he said he really didn't have any, hadn't seen a doctor in years, for me to go ahead and call Fred. Even tried to make a little joke out of it. He said that Fred had been in on it from the beginning and it would be silly to change doctors in the middle of a scream. I remember that because he began to laugh and then made a face and said it hurt to laugh.

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"Anyway, Fred came right over and shot antitoxin into him, and gave him something to put him to sleep. He said it was serious enough for Tom to need nursing round the clock for a day or two, until he was out of the woods. He called his hospital—"

"Wait, please, Jerry. When Fred gave Tom the shot, he thought it would save him?"

"Why, yes. I think so. He didn't actually say that, as far as I recall, but certainly we didn't expect Tom to die. What are you getting at, Sar?"

"Just trying to see the picture. Go on, Jerry."

"Well, as I was saying, Fred called his hospital to try to get a nurse for Tom, but on a Saturday night there wasn't a chance. I phoned Kirk, thinking he might dig up somebody through the State Department. He came right over, but he couldn't produce anybody. Finally I tried Ethel, to ask if she knew someone who might help. She said no, but she would come over herself and stand by till Fred got hold of a nurse. She was a volunteer hospital worker during the war, you know."

Sarah said, "When did the nurse come?"

"Sunday morning. And Sunday night she called the doctor again. On Monday morning Fred phoned to say he was seriously worried about Tom. The antitoxin didn't seem to have taken hold. Fred had given him a second shot—by lumbar puncture as they call it. Something they do only in extreme cases. I went right over. Kirk was there, too. Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"Yes—everything."

"All right, then. He was nearly rigid. Unable to open his mouth. Couldn't bear the slightest movement. They shot him full of morphine to kill the pain. The thing that really shook me was the terrible grin on his face. As if he felt compelled to smile at a bad joke."

"Yes." Her voice was steady. "The *risus sardonicus*." In answer to his raised eyebrows she added, "I've been reading up on tetanus."

"Then you know how it is," he said. "The awful cramps, and all that. Fred said he had never seen a more virulent attack. Since Tom couldn't take food through his mouth and they didn't want to risk moving him, they brought in equipment and fed him intravenously. But none of it did any good. He lasted through the night. Until early next morning."

She sat motionless, looking out into the garden, listening to the musicians. They were chanting a strange song that she had never heard before, while the guitars played a progression of wild and wailing chords that made her think of the jungles of the Amazon.

After a time Cheever said, "Sar, I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am."

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"I know," she said quietly. "Tell me, will Fred be here this evening?"

"He usually drops in, if he can. I've told him it's a good idea for him to put a checkrein on Nickie before she—"

He stopped as the door opened and Ethel Cheever spoke sharply behind him. "People are looking for you, Jerry. Do you expect me to give these parties alone? I'm half dead on my feet, and here you are, having a nice little gossip—"

Rising, Sarah said, "My fault, Ethel. I had to ask Jerry about Tom. Please understand."

The raddled face beneath the ludicrous coiffure softened. "Of course, dear. That's all right. Sorry if I sounded irritable. I haven't been sleeping—pills don't help much—and my nerves get unstrung at the slightest thing."

Cheever said, "Sarah had a letter from Tom that didn't reach her until just recently. It made her think his death perhaps wasn't an accident after all." He turned to Sarah. "You don't mind my telling Ethel, do you?"

"Of course not. I'll show you the letter later." Sarah picked up her handbag.

"Yes, do come along now," said Ethel.

As they made their way back to the party, Fred Cheever intercepted them. "Sarah," he said blinking at her gravely. "Nickie told me you were here. Can you spare me a minute? Mother, Dad, do you mind? I'd like to talk to Sarah alone."

He waited until his parents had moved away before speaking again. "Let's go out there," he said, indicating the garden.

He was a thin man, vaguely resembling his mother. Dark hair which had retreated to a last stand on his high forehead, and blue eyes which seemed to gaze wearily on a world devoid of pleasure, made him look older than his forty years. Sarah had always wondered what substitute he found for a bedside manner, for his features had an unexpected mobility; they seemed to register every emotion that passed through his mind, and his constant blinking of the eyes and pursing of the lips were not likely to reassure patients.

A tray offered by a passing maid gave them each the comfort of a cold glass in the hand. Stopping in a quiet corner of the garden, with the width of the lily pool between them and the nearest group of guests, they eyed each other wordlessly for a moment as they drank. The sun was setting in a confusion of pink clouds, and Sarah was aware of the contrast between the rosy glow on the animated scene and the bleakness of her thoughts.

Then Fred spoke abruptly. "Kirk said you're not satisfied about the way of Tom's death. I want you to understand how it looked from my standpoint."

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"Thank you, Fred," she answered. "I'd like to hear that." She had always felt a certain sympathy for him, such as women often feel for trapped men. His mother's fortune had not prevented him from making mistakes that had drained his life of hope—a marriage that had proved disastrous, a career in which he took no real pleasure. Stubbornness rather than strength had made him cling to both, until Nickie and the practice of medicine were habits too strong to be broken.

He said, "Believe me, when I signed Tom's death certificate I was as unhappy a man as you will ever see carrying a stethoscope. In spite of what people say, I liked him and respected him. I had no reason to think it was anything but a natural death."

"But doesn't tetanus usually take longer to kill?" she asked slowly.

"That's true. Tom's was an exceptionally bad case. I've never seen a worse. The toxin took hold with great speed. But some people are more susceptible than others. There are hard-luck cases in every disease, and that's the way Tom's struck me."

"I understand."

"It was just unfortunate that in his case the tetanus coincided with stupor induced by alcohol."

"You're sure it was alcohol?"

He looked surprised. "What else?" The surprise grew, until all his features were working—his eyebrows raised, his eyes wide, his nostrils distended, his mouth slightly open. "What are you saying, Sarah? I mean, if he wasn't drunk . . ." His voice trailed off, and with an effort he composed his face into its normal, slightly anxious expression. "I just assumed," he began, and stopped again. "The essential point," he said more firmly, "is that he neglected the wound. Didn't cleanse it."

"Tetanus poisoning is rather rare these days, isn't it?" she asked.

"Not that unusual. Here in Washington there are a number of cases every year. In fact, mother's gardener neglected a scratch shortly before Tom's accident, and I had to give him antitoxin. At that time I ran a laboratory test on the fertilizer he'd been using and found the bacillus in quantity. No doubt some of the fertilizer got on the rose thorns, and when Tom scratched himself—well, it's a hellish thing, the tetanus bacillus. The little devil secretes a very bad poison, and once it gets to the nerve centers there's not much to be done."

As he talked, she studied him coolly over the rim of her glass. Was his look of sincere regret genuine? Or was he in fact a murderer? Could it have been, she wondered, that Tom's original tetanus infection was accidental, and the murderous act was actually the withholding of the antitoxin? Who, after all, but Fred himself knew what he had injected into Tom's blood? Had the wealthy society physician, whose wife had been cheating on

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him for years, turned at last on one of her former lovers, when he found him bedridden and helpless?

True, Tom had been only a minor incident in Nickie's life, but Fred may well have believed that the affair was boiling up again, and an impulse to revenge may suddenly have exploded in his mind. Many a conventional man had been known to commit murder when the opportunity offered.

On the other hand, Sarah thought, it takes intense egoism and driving determination to murder, and she did not sense in Fred the passionate force needed to make a man risk everything for revenge. Certainly, after years of marriage, he was plainly no longer in love with Nickie. Then why would he kill?

She shook her head slightly and thought of the three key words of classical detection—opportunity, means, and motive. Fred certainly had the opportunity and the means. But motive?

As if he had been reading her mind, he made a wry grimace. "The only thing I reproach myself for was not noticing the scratch above Tom's wrist when they first brought him in from the garden. It never occurred to me to look. I wasn't in the best form myself, but I tried to do what was right for him. Believe me."

She said, "Tell me something, Fred. How does one prepare a tetanus culture?"

"What?" he said, and his face contorted again. But after a moment he answered quietly, "It's easy enough. Take some tetanus bacilli, put them in a bottle with the right stuff—and in three days you'll have as nasty a collection of invisible poisoners as you could wish."

"Anyone could do it?"

"Anyone with access to the tetanus and the culture medium."

"What is the culture medium?"

"Usually agar-agar. Germs thrive in it. It's stuff they make from some kind of seaweed. A sort of gelatine. But Sarah, if you think what I think you're thinking, put it out of your mind. It's just not possible."

"You mean it isn't done, Fred? Ladies and gentlemen don't commit murder?"

Again that consternated expression. "Good lord! You are serious!"

For a few seconds neither of them found anything to say. As the silence prolonged itself, she waved at a nearby acquaintance, murmured an apology to Fred, and moved away.

For half an hour she circulated from group to group, exchanging greetings with old friends, meeting new faces, uttering the banalities that were expected of her, experiencing a sense of release, as if she were drawing breath after having held it for an hour. With the gathering dusk a number of people had begun to glance at their watches and go indoors, where the Cheevers had taken up positions from which to

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say goodbye to those who were not staying for the buffet.

Sarah found an opportunity to move off by herself and walk slowly around the garden, pausing here and there as if admiring the blooms, until she came to the gigantic climbing rosebushes that were her objective. There, she thought, might be the spot where Tom had lain, in that deeply shadowed area, overhung by the sweeping branches, heavy with huge red roses, the first of the spring flowering. At the sight of the thick, needle-sharp thorns, some nearly an inch long, she shuddered. She had seen death in many forms—from bullets on the battlefields of South Vietnam, from starvation in the Congo, from cholera in Ecuador—but she could think of no life-ending worse than that which the man she loved had encountered; the thought filled her with dark horror.

She forced her mind back to reality. Which thorn, she wondered, had inflicted that fatal scratch—if indeed a rose thorn had actually been responsible? She envisioned a man falling, face forward. His forehead might easily have got scratched—but his forearm? The thorn would have had to penetrate the cloth of his jacket and shirt. Had anyone thought to look at the sleeve of the suit Tom had worn? She supposed not, and after six months . . .

Kirk's voice behind her said, "Well, at last. You're as elusive as a hummingbird. I've been searching all over for you."

She turned with a smile, and seeing a garden seat nearby, went to it, and waited for him to sit next to her. His face as usual looked as if someone had just bumped into him without apologizing.

"You're staying for supper?" he said.

"I think so."

She saw eyes turn toward them from those guests who were still meandering and drinking on the lawn, for Kirk's height and breadth of shoulder, the pugnacious quality of his features and the loose-fitting elegance of his clothes, drew feminine interest wherever he went. He said, "Sar, have you heard I'm going to run for the Senate?"

"Ethel told me. You'll have a fight on your hands, won't you?"

"Yes, the opposition will be tough, but I know I can make it. They like my family back home and I can find the money for the campaign. There's only one thing I lack. You."

The corners of her lips twitched. "You mean—I'd look well on television as the candidate's wife? With a dog, perhaps?"

He scowled as he retorted, "You know perfectly well what I mean. If these years past I haven't actually said that I love you, it was only because Tom was my friend—you know that. Well, he's dead and I miss him—but we're alive and I don't want to miss you. It's six

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months now, Sarah. These days that's mourning enough. You and I could have a good life together. Assuming that you feel something for me—you do, don't you? Well, think of it. Me a Senator. You the best woman foreign correspondent in the country. Sar, we'd bowl 'em over. Come on, marry me."

She put her hand on his and said, "Thank you, Kirk. But I can't."

"Why on earth not? Is there someone else?"

"No one else. It's just that—Tom is still in my blood. In a way I'm —haunted."

"What does that mean?" he said angrily. "You're being sentimental."

"Am I? I don't think that's the word. Remember Hamlet's feelings when he saw the ghost? I feel Tom as an unappeased spirit. Perhaps it's silly, but there's an obligation on me to be sure about—about—" She stopped short.

He said, "Since when has Sarah Burton been mealy-mouthed? You mean Tom's death. All right, let's face that, let's clear it up and get it out of the way. I told you I had my suspicions. So I do. I don't think Tom died a natural death. I think he was killed. And I'm willing to name names. Arturo Olivarez. You know who I mean?"

"Oh, yes. His name keeps coming up. But why would he want to kill Tom?"

"I'd better tell you the whole story. You know why Olivarez came to Washington?"

"To represent his government, I thought."

"He was supposed to negotiate a treaty with us—recognition of the revolution, and also a loan for the new government. The administration was well disposed toward him. It seemed to be a true democratic revolution—just getting rid of Silvestre and then setting up a decent representative government. The loan was urgent, though. When Silvestre got out of the country he took every cent in the Pataguayan treasury with him. The new government needed cash, and fast—to pay the army and navy, to buy food and munitions. Otherwise it wouldn't stand a chance. Every week counted.

"Olivarez' job was to get that loan, pronto. And they asked me to work it out with him. There were complications. A few years before, in Silvestre's time, we had made Pataguaya a big loan—a hundred million—and Silvestre's government hadn't repaid a cent of it. We suspected but could never prove that a lot of it went into Silvestre's own pocket. That in itself might not have blocked the loan—after all, this was a different government, and one we liked, so we viewed the situation without prejudice.

"But then the damn fools confiscated an American-owned property. Naturally, we said they had to return it before we could give them any money. I never thought they'd hesitate. Then it struck me

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that Olivarez didn't seem to be in any hurry. He kept raising objections, dragging his feet, arguing over technical points. Later I figured out why. Silvestre must have reached him—bribed him to stall.

"And it worked. As soon as it became clear there was going to be a delay, the Pataguayan army officers started to get tough with the new government. That was it. Next thing, the government collapsed, Silvestre moved right back in, and Olivarez quietly left Washington, destination unknown. Doesn't it all tie together?"

"But where does Tom fit in all this?"

"I hate to say this, Sar, but I'm afraid I'm responsible for getting him into it. While I was still negotiating with Olivarez, I tipped Tom off as to my suspicions. He was on it like a shot. You know, he was always against dictators like Silvestre, and he said if he could prove Olivarez was a traitor to his government he'd blow him sky high in his column. I thought I had given him everything he needed, but apparently he decided to talk to Olivarez before printing the story. Jerry saw them lunching together. Olivarez must have recognized the danger he was in. He must have been desperate to prevent exposure."

Sarah said, "But that's merely assumption, isn't it, Kirk?"

"Assumption, hell. Consider the facts. Olivarez sees that he has to stop Tom from putting the story together and printing it. There's no time to be lost. They meet here, at Ethel's next party. I saw them talking at the bar. Olivarez must have been all set to act. It wouldn't have been hard for him to slip something into Tom's drink. Nothing too strong—some drops that would take ten or fifteen minutes to act—there are such things.

"Matter of fact, I never believed that Tom drank much that night. When I saw him earlier he was nursing his glass and being very abstemious. But if there was something in his drink—something to make him feel sick or drowsy—he wouldn't have wanted to create a fuss. You remember what he used to say—that a good columnist had to keep out of other columnists' columns."

"I remember," Sarah said.

"Well, feeling the way he did, he would either have gone home, or if he didn't think he could make it to the front door, it would be natural for him to go into the cool of the garden and try to walk it off. That's what he did, and that gave Olivarez his chance. Of course, he wasn't going to commit an obvious murder with a knife or a bullet. He couldn't risk being seen or heard, and the body on the premises—sorry Sar, but I've got to explain—the body would have meant an investigation. The thing had to be made to look like a *bona fide* accident with death coming at a later time.

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"Well, Olivarez has made his plan. Tom is in the garden. Olivarez is waiting. He sneaks after Tom—watches him collapse—perhaps pushes him or drags him into the rosebushes—sees to it that the thorns scratch his face. Maybe he doesn't do anything just yet—wants to make sure he hasn't been seen, perhaps. It was black out there, but I suppose he saw me in the garden against the lighted house, when I went out to look for Tom. Worse luck, I never got as far as the rosebushes. That was the only break Olivarez needed. As soon as I went back into the house he carried out the rest of his plan."

"What was that?" Sarah tried to make it sound like a reporter's question, impersonal and bland, but in spite of herself her voice shook. Kirk noticed, and pressed her arm for a moment, reassuringly.

"This must be hard on you, but there's not much more. Olivarez was shrewd. He wanted someone with him when Tom was found. The way I see it, he went back into the house and headed straight for Nickie. Up to that time he'd been paying a lot of attention to Barbie, and it looked as if they might even make it official. Naturally, Nickie being the kind of predatory female she is, and he being tall, dark, and Latin, she wouldn't let a little thing like her daughter's feelings stand in her way.

"All Olivarez had to do was to suggest that they take a stroll in the garden, and off she trots with him. He leads her to the rosebushes accidentally on purpose stumbles over Tom, and sends Nickie back to the house for help. And then dear Arturo had his chance. He needed only a few seconds to make that scratch on Tom's forearm and load it with germs."

"Load it how?"

"My guess is a hypodermic injection in the middle of the scratch. It was a deep scratch and a tiny puncture wouldn't be noticed. How he got the germs hardly matters. In South America death from tetanus is commonplace. Maybe the idea came to him when the Cheever's gardener had to have an antitetanus inoculation. Ethel told everybody about that."

Sarah said, "But surely it would be a very chancy thing for him to do. Suppose a doctor gave Tom antitoxin and he recovered? Olivarez would have been right back where he was—perhaps worse off, if Tom became suspicious."

"That's where the really diabolical part comes in. I've made some inquiries. Ordinarily if a scratch becomes infected there's plenty of time to knock out the bugs with a dose of antitoxin. But if there had been an artificial injection of the poison directly into the bloodstream, that would be another matter. The normal antitoxin inoculation is calculated for the usual mild infection. It wouldn't save the patient who had been artificially poisoned with a

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massive quantity of the bacillus. What's more, his jaws would soon lock so that he couldn't talk—he would be helpless. You see? Oh, he was clever, Arturo."

He waited for her to speak. A thin sliver of moon had risen in the twilight sky, one or two stars were visible, and a faint rose-scented breeze stirred around them. It occurred to Sarah that the soft beauty of the garden was like a drug lulling her senses, when she wanted them clear and sharp.

She sat silently for a time, forcing her mind to work. Kirk looked at her narrowly. "That's the way it must have been," he said. "It's the only way I can see it."

Idly she unsnapped and snapped the catch of her simple black handbag. He reacted instantly. "That letter from Tom. Is there anything in it about Olivarez?"

"His name is mentioned, yes," she acknowledged. "Have you told anyone else what you've told me, Kirk?"

"What's the use? He's out of reach, and I've no real evidence. Couldn't convict him even if he was here. There's nothing to be done. If I started a fuss, nothing would come of it, except to make the Cheevers more unhappy than they are about Tom. Why whip up a scandal to no purpose?"

"Yes, there's that," she said. "I think we ought to go in. We're the last ones out here."

He said, "Any reason why I shouldn't see Tom's letter?"

After a moment she said, "It's too dark to read."

There was an assertive note in his voice as he replied, "I carry a pocket light." He reached into a pocket and showed her a slim gold pencil. "The Cheevers gave it to me for Christmas—comes in handy." He flicked a switch and threw a thin beam of light on her bag.

"I must tell you, Kirk," she said. "Tom didn't share your feelings about Olivarez. It was someone else he was after."

"I think that gives me the right to see his letter, don't you?"

Without further word she opened the bag, took out an envelope, extracted a single closely typewritten sheet, and handed it to him. As he turned his flashlight on it, she instinctively moved away from him on the bench, and closed her eyes. She knew the letter by heart.

"Darling—I miss you unbelievably—and we an old married couple of three months' standing. The loneliness that I've felt ever since you took off (remember your promise, this is your last assignment) is aggravated by some queer internal goings-on. Probably 24 hour flu or the like.

"Last night I lay in a cold damp garden for a while. At the Cheever party. Does that arouse curiosity? I was alone, I hasten to add. An altogether odd experience. I really hadn't had much booze. Could

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someone have hocused my drink? I find it hard to believe—and yet, what else? Just before they served supper, I began to feel sleepy and a little nauseated, and I went into the garden hoping to revive or throw up or something. I knew if I sat down I'd pass out, so I tried to walk, but the grogginess got worse.

"I could hardly see where I was going—no moon, no stars, and once I got away from the lights of the house, I just stumbled along in the dark. Suddenly I saw a tiny beam of light waving ahead of me, and a voice—I couldn't recognize it—said, 'Tom.'

"I stumbled ahead, but the light went out. After that I seem to remember seeing some sparks nearby. Then I staggered or maybe was pushed right into the Cheever rosebushes.

"That's all I remember until I found myself sitting up, with Jerry and Arturo Olivarez holding me. I don't think you know Olivarez. A nice guy—he's up here representing the new Pataguayan government. They got me into the house, I slept for a while, came home, and have been swilling tea and aspirin and bathing my rose-thorn scratches.

"It's no time for me to be laid up even for a day. There's a hot story brewing around Pataguaya and I may have to fly down there unless Olivarez' colleagues in the new government can uncover the documents I need. My only regret is that if the story pans out, it will be embarrassing for one of our friends.

"I've been over the ethics of the thing repeatedly in my mind, and I don't see that I have any choice—not with the future of an entire nation at stake. You'll agree, I know, when I give you the entire rundown. I write this much now because if the story breaks before you get back and you hear about it, I don't want you to be shocked.

"Now I'm going to fall into my lonely bed and try to get over my whatever-it-is by thinking about you—a sovereign remedy for all my ills, I find. Take care of yourself, stay out of danger, avoid the dark alleys of Damascus—and write! Remembering that my love for you increaseth with each hour. Tom."

With meticulous care, Kirk refolded the sheet and returned it to the envelope, which he kept in his hands. "I'm glad you showed me this. Tom must have been delirious when he wrote it."

"Oh, come off it, Kirk," Sarah said sharply.

"Well, delirious or not, he wasn't thinking. Olivarez cooked up some kind of story to cover his own tracks and although it's hard to believe that a tough-minded man like Tom would fall for it, he evidently did. Do you still take it seriously, after what I've told you?"

"I want to know—everything," Sarah said. "I need to free my mind of doubt."

"Jerry Cheever ought to see this

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letter," said Kirk. "After all, the thing happened in his house. He has a right to know what Tom says here. Mind if I show it to him?"

Sarah said. "No. Go ahead."

Ethel Cheever saw them come in together from the garden. "So there you are, Sarah! Has he been wooing you? You're staying for supper, of course. A rijsttafel."

She pointed to the supper room, adjoining the salon, where a hundred candles in three huge chandeliers lighted a long buffet table, covered in white. A score of polished golden dishes reflected the candles like bursting fireworks. Some twenty round tables, seating five or six people each, had been laid with napery and cutlery for the guests, who would carry their own trays from the buffet. Alongside each table stood a silver wine cooler, with the thin necks of Rhine-wine bottles protruding from the ice.

Behind the buffet, prepared to assist the guests, were Clifton, the Cheevers' British butler, and several uniformed maids. At one end stood Ethel's second chef, a tiny figure in white duck trousers and jacket and a huge chef's cap that made him look, Sarah thought, like a new variety of mushroom. A dark face, with a broad, tooth-revealing smile, suggested that Pilang, happy in his accomplishment, was prepared to receive congratulations.

"His menus are absolutely *divine*," said Ethel. "Look." She showed Sarah a printed card with which she had been entertaining the guests around her. Sarah read the menu (see next page), then handed it to Kirk.

"What a woman you are, Ethel!" said Kirk. "In your own way, you're a great impresario. You've made the Cheever party a status symbol—something that people brag about going to—like owning a Picasso or a racing stable."

"That's very sweet, Kirk. At least, I think it is. With you, there may be a hidden something, I'll have to reflect on it. He'll go far, don't you think, Sar? Underneath that statesmanlike exterior there is the heart of Casanova and the mind of Machiavelli. Washington does spoil bachelors so!"

She swirled away on high heels. Nearly a hundred people had stayed for supper, and in spite of the high ceiling their voices filled the great drawing room with waves of sound like beating surf. Sarah saw Clifton take up a position at the entrance of the supper room, and on a signal from Ethel, strike a small Oriental gong with a tiny mallet. Eagerly the crowd began to move toward the long buffet table.

Barbara Cheever came up behind Sarah and said, "Be my friend, Sarah. Give me a shoulder to cry on. I'm about to reach that stage." Although she was a little drunk, her speech was clear and fluent. As she glanced at Kirk a hostile glint came into her eyes; upon which he smiled

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RIJSTTAFEL

Javanese Rice Table Dinner

Hors d'Oeuvres Canapés
(Appetizer Canapés)

Sajoer Pilang
(Javanese Light Special Cold Soup by Pilang)

Kropoek Pilang
(Fluffy Fried Shrimp Cakes by Pilang)

Telor Masak Kras, Oedang Masak
(Sambals of Hard-Cooked Eggs, Peeled Cooked Shrimps)

(Above cooked foods with spicy sauces by Pilang)

Sates
(Broiled Meats on Skewers)

Nasih Goreng
(Curried Fried Rice with Chicken)

Ayam Abon Abon
(Shredded Chicken)

Daging Babi
(Pork Dish in Special Sauce)

Iekan Bandang Panggang
(Spiced Baked Fish in Special Sauce)

Ketchap
(Soya Bean Sauce)

Nasi
(Boiled Rice)

Bawang Goreng
(Fried Onions)

Gado Gado Batawie
(Vegetable Dish from Batavia by Pilang)

Atjar
(Many Pickles)

Katchang Goreng
(Roasted Peanuts)

Pisang Goreng
(Fried Bananas)

Trai Kai
(Fresh Fruits, Cambodian Style, in Special Liqueur Sauce by Pilang)

Rhenischer Wein: Johannisberg Schloss, 1957

Thee or Kaffee
(Tea or Coffee)

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knowingly at Sarah and said, "Until later, then. Let me drive you home."

Barbara's eyes followed Kirk as he turned away. She said, "I hope you're not going to marry him, Sar. I just can't stand that man."

"Why, Barbie?"

"Oh, a small matter. He wrecked my life, that's all. Are you starving? If you're not, let's stay out here and talk until the rest have stuffed their silly faces." She walked to a large bar, set in an alcove of the drawing room. "Here, have a drink and keep me company. Scotch for you, as always?"

As they sat on a couch Sarah said, "How did Kirk wreck your life?"

"Kirk. And Grandma. And Grandpa. And Mother. Oh, it was a noble conspiracy."

"To do what?"

"To take Arturo away from me, of course. Oh, that's right, you never met Arturo, did you, Sar? He knew about you, though. He used to read your articles, and I bragged about knowing you. Once he said"—her voice dropped, without mockery, into a Latin-American accent—"I marvel that a young woman should write so brilliantly of war and politics." She caught her breath. "Oh, Sar, Sar! I know how you must feel about Tom, because of how I feel about Arturo."

"But Arturo's still alive. And if you love each other—"

"Oh, we do. We did. I do. But he's gone away, and I don't know when I'll see him again, and he hasn't written. Last winter when Jerry and Ethel went to Pataguaya I flew down hoping to find out where he was. But of course with General Silvestre back in power Arturo doesn't dare return to his country—they'd kill him. Someone said he was in Chile, preparing for another revolution, but no one seemed to be sure."

"How did you like Jerry's ranch?"

"The ranch?" With an effort Barbie focused on the question. Taking a long sip from her cocktail glass, she said, "Oh, sumptuous, of course. Like a little kingdom. Thousands of acres, thousands of peons and gauchos, thousands of horses and cattle, a huge house, several villages. And Jerry riding around in a sombrero and boots and with a pistol in his belt and a retinue of gauchos, like the hero of an Argentine movie. Poor Jerry. It's the only thing of his own he's ever had, and he's so proud of it. He was heartbroken when the revolutionists confiscated it, and happy as a child when Silvestre gave it back to him." An ironic smile twisted her full lips, which were painted in a red too deep for her natural pale coloring.

Sarah said, "He bought the ranch when he was ambassador, didn't he?"

"I was only a child then. Seems to me all my life I've been on Jerry's side. Tell you a secret, if you don't know it. Grandma's a tightwad. Don't let all her millions and these lush parties fool you. When it comes to money for anybody else, she's mean. Know what she gave me for

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my birthday? A clock. I mean it. A clock. Something she probably had around in a closet for years. She's always kept Jerry practically on pocket change. I think in the early days she was afraid he might leave her if he became independent—he's younger than she is you know. Oh, I love to spill the family dirt! It does me good!"

She drank again, thirstily. "Grandma was stingy with Daddy, too. He wanted to be an archeologist, and it was she who pushed him into medicine. Strictly for the money. She said he wasn't bright enough for one of the intellectual professions, but with her social connections she could assure him of the most lucrative practice in Washington. And like everybody, he kowtowed to her. Grandma! I'd like to spit in her eye! She always has her claws in some poor sap of a man. Now it's Kirk, and it serves him right."

"Kirk?"

"You don't think he has enough money of his own to run for the Senate, do you?"

Her speech had become slurred, and Sarah said, "How about some food, Barbie?"

"Oh, no, don't go yet. The freeloaders will still be thick around the buffet, and you'll have to stand in line. Besides, I want to ask you something. About Arturo." As Sarah looked at her questioningly, Barbie plunged on. "You newspaper people can find out almost anything, can't you? I mean, isn't there some way you can find Arturo for me?"

"I'll try. Our South American correspondents ought to be able to locate him."

The girl seized Sarah's hand and kissed it. Gently Sarah raised the blonde head, and caressed Barbie's cheek, before speaking again. "Barbie, I'm nearly ten years older than you. I'm not sure that gives me any rights but I like you, too, so I'm going to speak frankly. Don't you think you ought to leave it to Arturo to get in touch? If he loves you—"

"He does! I know it, Sar." The girl's voice almost broke, but she gulped the rest of her drink and faced Sarah with a look of determination. "He's not a cheat. I wish you knew him. A beautiful man, Sar, and we both felt the same way. The family never knew it, but I came down from school half a dozen weekends and he and I had wonderful times together. We were going to announce our engagement. That was just a few days before—before Tom died. Then everything blew up."

Sarah met the girl's unhappy eyes and said, "Were you here that night, Barbie? Tell me about it."

"I'll never forget it. Arturo was in a rage that evening. At Kirk. He told me that Kirk had accused him of holding up the negotiation for the loan, and it was a lie. It was Kirk who was finding a thousand reasons to delay. We were in the garden, and

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I remember his face when he said the future of a whole nation was being endangered by one scheming bureaucrat, and it was intolerable. There was something he had to tell Tom, he was looking for him. Arturo liked Tom so much, Sar. Later I saw them talking together at the bar. It was right after that"—her voice trembled. "Oh, Sar, it was awful."

"Go on, Barbie."

"I was talking with people, and I looked up, and I saw Mother and Arturo going into the garden together. She was holding on to his arm. My first thought was that Arturo was going to tell her about us, although I couldn't understand why they had to go into the garden for that. When they didn't come back for minutes, I got upset because I know how Mother is when she's been drinking. Which means I know how Mother is, period.

"Then all at once she rushed in alone, her face very flushed. She went up to Jerry, and he followed her back into the garden. I thought something might have happened to Arturo, so I went after them. It was dark, and I couldn't see much, but I heard voices, and soon Jerry and Arturo came toward the house, and Mother after them. They were sort of carrying Tom. He didn't seem able to walk. I asked Mother what had happened, and she just said Tom had passed out, not to mention it; and then she went into the house.

"Jerry and Arturo carried Tom inside by the servants' entrance, and I waited at the door. After a few seconds Arturo came out. He said he had to find my father, that Tom needed a doctor, and he hurried into the house. I went after him. That's when I saw it."

"Saw what, Barbie?"

"The lipstick on his mouth and cheek. It was Mother's orange lipstick, Sar. I can't tell you what that did to me. I wanted to kill somebody! I knew just what she had done, or tried to do."

Sarah touched the girl's hand, but said nothing.

"It was all a kind of nightmare after that. I knew it wasn't Arturo's fault, but I couldn't help including him in my rage. I went up to him and said, 'After you've wiped that paint off your face, you stinking rat, come back and I'll tell you what a lowborn louse you are.'

"I should never have said that, especially to a proud Latin. He turned pale and he said, 'Perhaps it is as well. For us it is already hopeless.' Then he went away. Right out of the house."

"Didn't you see him again?"

"Oh, yes. I called him the next day and I knew then he really loved me, because he said he wanted to see me, too. We lunched together. He was very serious. Wouldn't talk about the lipstick. It must have been a disgusting thing for him. He said he loved me, but marriage between us now would be very difficult. I thought he meant because

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I had such an incredible mother and might take after her, but no, he said it was for other reasons.

"I kept asking him, why, why? Finally he said he did not wish to come between me and my family. I said I didn't give a damn about my family, that I loved him and wanted to go where he went. He kissed my hand and looked as if I had stabbed him to the heart. He kept saying it was very difficult. Then he had to go back to his office, and we agreed to meet again next day. Only we didn't."

Her eyes glistened. "Overnight the news came that Silvestre had started the counter-revolution, and Arturo's government cabled him to come back at once. He telephoned me to say goodbye—he was rushing for a plane—and that was the last time I heard his voice."

"Do you think he—he may have been hurt in the fighting?"

Barbie shook her head, and tears dropped from her eyes. "Sorry, Sar. I'm all right. No, I'm sure he wasn't hurt. Grandfather found out for me that the people in the democratic government had gone to other countries, and Arturo was rumored to be in Chile. But we couldn't get an address—he had gone underground or something, and I wasn't able to reach him, and he hasn't written. I suppose he thinks it's no use—he and I and the family, and his being an exile."

"Yes, that's very possible," Sarah said. "He may think it's best for you to forget."

"As if I could!" Barbie cried. "But you'll help, won't you, Sar? You promised."

"Yes. I'll do all I can. Better fix your face, Barbie, and get something to eat. They'll be looking for us. I'll go in now."

As Sarah entered the supper room, voices greeted her, among them Ethel Cheever's strident contralto. "Where have you been? Get some food, and Sar, sit here with me. Be sure to try the soup. It's Pilang's specialty."

A maid put a tray containing a single enormous plate into Sarah's hands, and she moved down the long array of the rijsttafel, allowing the maids to put a morsel from each serving dish onto her plate. At the end of the buffet Pilang was waiting behind a huge tureen of clear greenish soup, which stood on a mound of crushed ice; and he ladled a cupful for her, with a knowing smile.

Seated finally at Ethel's table, Sarah tasted the soup, and smiled appreciatively; its delicately tart flavor, and smooth consistency, neither thick nor thin, were in the great Indonesian tradition.

"Delicious, isn't it?" Ethel demanded. "Pilang says it takes him days. First he makes ordinary Javanese soup, then he strains out all the vegetables and fish, and adds his special seasoning, and chills the clear broth. Everyone adores it."

"I've had Javanese soup, but it

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never tasted as good as this," Sarah acknowledged.

"Oh, do say that to Pilang. I want to keep him happy. Half a dozen embassies are trying to lure him away from me. He's been written up in all the newspapers, you know, and he's developing a prima donna temperament."

"I'll do it now," said Sarah. Returning to the buffet she said to the Javanese, "Pilang, may I have another cup of your soup? It's wonderful. In Jakarta, even in the best places, no one has so good a soup."

Pilang grinned his pleasure. "Ah, lady has been in Jakarta! Once it was good there to be cook in special houses. Now not so good. No more rich Dutch. But here, plenty rich people, I make my special things."

"Lucky for all of us," said Sarah. "But where do you get all the ingredients—the things you put into the soup? You can't buy them here, can you?"

"Oh, no. Things come in special cans from Jakarta. I have special friends there—they send. Ve'y expensive. But Cheevers ve'y rich." He grinned again.

"Do people ever steal any of your special cans?"

"Lady?"

"I'm just curious. Do you happen to remember, about six months ago, missing one of your special cans?"

Pilang's eyes widened and his brown face became an expressionless mask. "One can, who care? Maybe lost. I not remember."

"Well, thank you, Pilang, for the soup. I'll never forget it."

Sarah went back to her table, noticing that many of the guests were again at the buffet, helping themselves to fresh fruit slices in liqueur syrup. She said to Ethel, "Pilang has just been telling me about his special cans from Jakarta."

"Those special cans! He and Jerry have worked out some sort of arrangement for getting them. They cost a fortune—I'm sure Pilang and his pals are profiteering. Do you like the rijsttafel?" With no perceptible change of intonation, she added, "Kirk tells me you think Tom was murdered."

Sarah said, "Didn't the same thought ever cross your mind?"

"What a nasty idea, Sar. Must you?"

"In my place, Ethel, you would do the same."

"Oh, I suppose so. Perhaps it was Arturo. That's what Kirk thinks, I know. It's all so long ago, now, I don't see how anybody can tell. But of course it matters to you, I see that. Jerry!" She hailed her husband, who was passing. "Keep Sarah company—I'm going to look after things in the other room. Do stay after the others go, Sar—we'll have a good talk."

As she left the table, Cheever dropped into her chair. He showed no sign of the whiskey and wine he had consumed; his voice was controlled, and pleasantly amused. "And how is the goddess Diana mak-

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ing out? Kirk showed me Tom's letter, and I took the liberty of sharing it with the rest of the family. Here it is. You'll want it back." He took the letter from his pocket, and she slipped it into her handbag.

She said, "Do you agree with Kirk, Jerry, that it was Arturo Olivarez who killed Tom?"

Cheever lowered his voice. "That's a hell of a thing to have to answer. What proof is there? And why try to make a murder out of what might well have been an accident? Sar, I know how you feel, but you're on the wrong track. Tom is gone. Think ahead, not backward. You're a beautiful, talented young woman with a life to live. Don't let the past wreck you."

"I don't intend to, Jerry. I regard what I'm doing as a professional responsibility. Tom was working on an important story when he died. I want to finish it for him."

More and more chairs were being vacated as people left the supper room. Sarah and Jerry were the last ones at their table. He said, "How far have you got?"

"It's beginning to jell."

"I see. I hope you don't make any mistakes, Sar."

"I'll try not to."

"Care for another glass of wine?"

"No, thanks—it's excellent, and so is the rijsttafel, but I've had enough. It must be a bore for you, Jerry, sitting here watching me eat. I've had enough, really—shall we go?"

It was after eleven o'clock when the last guests, Sarah and Kirk excepted, left he Cheever home. Half an hour earlier Sarah had gone into the garden and sat on the bench which she and Kirk had occupied earlier.

A feeling of mordant loneliness had descended on her, but she fought back a temptation to weep; it was no time for self-pity, or any other kind. Soon her thoughts so absorbed her that Kirk, crossing the moonlit lawn, came within a few feet of the bench before she saw him. At the same instant he spoke, in a tone which made clear the depth of his annoyance.

"Sarah," he said, "for God's sake, what are you doing out here? What are you up to? You've put the Cheevers in a most embarrassing position."

"Yes, I'm sorry about that," she said, rising.

"Practically everybody has gone. I told you I'd drive you home. Ready to leave?"

"No, not just yet, Kirk. Do you mind? There's something I must talk to the family about."

"Oh, God!" he said. "What do you hope to accomplish by that? They're half stoned, we're all sleepy. This is a hell of a time for a talk."

"For what I want to say, any time would be a hell of a time."

"And what does that mean?" He stood in front of her, a powerful figure, scowling; but his voice softened and grew husky as he looked

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at her. "You're so damned lovely, with the moonbeams in your hair."

She had a sudden fear that he was going to take her in his arms, and she stepped hastily aside and past him. "Come on," she said. "Let's go in. You'll want to hear this, too."

She was so accustomed to seeing a crowd in the great drawing room that at first it looked empty of human life. The notion passed through her mind that the five figures seated in a tight group and staring in her direction had the stiffness and immobility of bad sculpture. They seemed to be waiting, to have come together out of some inner need, to have found a family cohesiveness that they never had before.

Even Barbara had been drawn into their midst; she was sitting next to her father on a long sofa, and holding his hand. But it was Ethel Cheever, on Barbara's other side, who riveted the eye. In her glittering gold costume, contrasting sharply with the sofa's dark blue cover, and with her red wig flaming above, she looked like some fantastic Maharani in an ancient Indian painting; and the smoke rising from the cigarette in her hand might have been the incense of idolatry.

Next to Ethel, in a large armchair, Jerry Cheever sat motionless, his eyes apparently fixed on his wife's diamond-studded hands. It was only Nickie, in a chair at the other end of the sofa, who moved; as Kirk and Sarah approached she crossed her attractive legs, smoothed her skirt, leaned forward to say a word to her husband, then shrugged at his reply.

The clink of bottles and glasses caused Sarah to notice that Clifton, the butler, was in the room, unobtrusively setting up a small portable bar nearby, with an array of handsome sapphire-blue tumblers. Turning, he spoke formally to Ethel Cheever. "Will there by anything else, madam?"

"No, Clifton, thank you," said Ethel in her normal, loud voice. "We'll look after ourselves. Good night. Come, Sar, and you too, Kirk, pull up chairs and have a drink. I love these party postmortems. It was after our last party but one, Sar, that Jerry and I and two Senators who shall be nameless practically picked the new Secretary of Commerce. Fred, bartend, will you? Sarah takes Scotch, and bourbon for everyone else. But I don't think Barbie ought to have anything more."

As her son obediently rose, she swept on, dominating them all, ignoring the expression of protest in her granddaughter's face. "Was there any good gossip that I ought to know about? Did you speak to the Attorney General about the situation in California, Kirk? What did he say?"

Kirk muttered, "Not much," and Jerry said glumly, "Before we get into that, Ethel." He concentrated his gaze on Sarah. "I was

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afraid you had left, Sar. We want to talk to you. I've been thinking about what you said at supper. You know we love you, and we couldn't be more sympathetic about Tom, but don't you think you're going a little far? The feeling I get is that you think one of us is a murderer. That's what it amounts to, doesn't it? If you don't mind my saying so, it's ridiculous, it's unfriendly, and it's unpleasant."

Sarah, sitting very still in her chair, waited for him to go on. When he did not, she said in a low, even voice, "Unpleasant. It was unpleasant for Tom, too, if you recall. Unfriendly. I'm sorry about that, Jerry, but perhaps you had better stop thinking of me as a guest. Right now I'm a reporter working on a story. As for it's being ridiculous—we'll see."

Nickie stirred restlessly in her chair. "A story, Sar? What story? Nobody told me about a story. I certainly don't think it's fair of you to come here, pretending to be our friend, and then write stories about us. Tom never did that, and we all knew him much longer than we've known you. I think I knew him well enough to say—"

When Jerry said wearily, "Cut it out," she tried to go on, but Fred, to Sarah's surprise, snapped from the bar, "That's enough, Nickie." He thrust a blue glass into her hand, with a glare that seemed to intimidate her, for she lowered her eyes and subsided.

"Let me tell you about my story," Sarah said, sitting back in her chair. "You're entitled to know, because you're all in it. I see it as a piece for one of the big magazines. The title might be something like, 'Who Killed My Husband, Tom Burton?' Sensational, of course, but from my standpoint that's all to the good. What I want to do is compel a police investigation of Tom's death. I'm assuming that the Washington police, left to themselves, would hesitate to offend a man of your influence, Jerry, by stirring up a scandal. But with a hard-hitting article in a major magazine and with the help of friends in Congress and the F.B.I., I think I might get them started. Don't you?"

Except for the sounds made by Fred at the little bar, the silence in the room was complete. Barbara said sullenly, "I want a drink."

"Oh, let her have one," said Jerry.

Ethel shrugged.

"A gin and tonic, please, Daddy," said Barbara.

Fred poured it for her, then went back to the sofa.

Clasping her cold glass in her hand, and speaking in a voice that surprised herself by its vibrant force, Sarah turned toward Kirk and said, "My story starts with you."

"Oh?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

"You blamed Olivarez for the delay in the negotiations for the

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Pataguayan loan. If you were telling the truth, it may well be that Arturo Olivarez was working for Silvestre, and that he killed Tom to prevent exposure."

"No!" Barbara cried. "No, Sar. He hated Silvestre! He would never have hurt Tom. He liked him!"

"And Tom liked Olivarez," said Sarah. "He said so in his letter, and he wasn't a man to be easily deceived about human nature. So, Kirk—my article must consider the possibility that it was you, not Olivarez, who lied."

Kirk looked at her steadily, with a tightening of the lips. "I wouldn't write that if I were you, Sarah," he said. "You know how I feel about you—but that won't stop me from fighting you if you want a fight. There's such a thing as the law of libel, you know."

"Oh, yes, I know about libel. As a reporter, I also know how to avoid it while making the points that I want to make. Don't worry about me, Kirk. I can handle myself in print. I won't say you lied. I'll just ask, if you did lie, why? What motive could you have had?"

The eyes of the faces opposite her were focused on her own, as if hypnotized, and she felt the energy of command welling up in her. She went on, "It would have been easy for you, in your position at the State Department, to delay the Pataguayan loan. You knew that the revolutionary government would then collapse, and Silvestre would get back in. But I don't suggest that Silvestre bribed you. I think I know you, Kirk. Your ambition puts career first and money second. You would never have jeopardized your future in government that way. You've never been a money grubber."

Kirk grunted. "Thank you for that much, anyway."

She looked at him without smiling. "It's only that much you have to thank me for. The question still remains—if not for a money bribe, why did you delay the Pataguayan loan?"

"If I did."

"If you did. My article will explore possible reasons. I think it's interesting that a few months after Silvestre regained power, you resigned from the State Department, and let it be known that you're going to run for the United States Senate from your home state. Now in order to do that, you need a great deal of money and a great deal of behind-the-scenes influence. You need, in other words, a rich backer—someone like your good friend, Jerry."

There was a sardonic chuckle from Jerry. He was leaning back carelessly in his chair, knees crossed, glass in hand, a faint smile on his healthy face, his white hair immaculate—the picture of the convivial host, the man of distinction.

"No secret about my backing Kirk, Sar. Sure I am. He's my

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friend, and he'll make a good Senator. Why shouldn't I help him?"

"Just so," said Sarah. "But wouldn't it be more correct, Jerry, to say that Ethel is helping him?"

Ethel said sharply, "Sarah, that's the first time I've ever known you to be rude." Her eyelids, heavy with mascara, blinked her annoyance.

"It's all right, dear," Jerry said tolerantly. "Sarah's under a strain. Everybody knows the money is yours. They also know we work together. Forget it."

"Let's start putting things in sequence," said Sarah. "If Kirk delayed the Pataguayan loan, the question arises, could he have done it to benefit you? Was it on your account, and with an eye to his political career, that Kirk stalled the negotiations with Olivarez?"

Kirk smiled grimly. "Perhaps I ought to let you publish that. I could get a million in damages from the magazine that printed it. Come down to earth, Sarah. You know how the Department works. Every stage of the negotiations with Olivarez is recorded in the files. If there was delay at any point, the reasons are in black and white, and approved all the way up the line."

"Oh," she said, unperturbed, "that I take for granted. Naturally, you covered yourself with the correct memoranda and reports. I'm not trying to expose the weaknesses of the State Department. We're talking about murder."

At the word silence fell again.

The only face Sarah saw that was not hostile was Barbara's, which looked merely confused and tipsy.

"Yes," Sarah resumed, "as my article will point out, it isn't possible to understand Tom's murder unless one first understands the motive. I think I do."

The urgency of her low-pitched voice held them waiting while she put the blue tumbler to her lips and formulated her next words. "As a result of the delay in the loan, the democratic Pataguayan government lost control of the army, and Silvestre came back into power. At first I wondered whether the motive of the delay was simply to help Silvestre. Everybody knows he is a friend of yours, Jerry. But I couldn't see you taking the risk of conspiring with Kirk to subvert this country's foreign policy merely for the sake of an old diplomatic friendship. I can't believe that."

"Neither can I," said Jerry, laughing. "So that puts us in agreement at last."

"Does it? You might have had another motive, Jerry, for wanting to see Silvestre return to Pataguaya as dictator. It might come from the days when you were down there as ambassador, and he was the strong man of South America."

Jerry stared at her, glanced at his wife, then chuckled. "It's your story. We're listening."

Ethel said, "What a silly girl you are, Sarah. Do you realize

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you're throwing away our friendship?"

"It's a loss I'll have to bear," Sarah said, "and I'm beyond threats, now. Let's go back to Pataguaya, seven years ago, Jerry. As Kirk reminded me when we talked before supper, our government made a large loan to Silvestre's government. That must have been on your recommendation, as ambassador. None of the loan was ever repaid. And then an interesting thing happened. You acquired a big ranch in Pataguaya, a great *estancia*, worth a fortune."

"What's surprising about that?" Ethel demanded. "We could afford it."

"Yes, but did you *buy* it? That, it seems to me, is the key question."

"Of course we did."

"Then you will be able to show checks and bank records to prove it."

"You're insolent. We don't have to prove anything to you."

As Ethel spat out the words, Sarah, who had been sitting tensely in her chair, smiled and relaxed, as if she had heard what she wanted to hear. "True—you won't have to show your records until the police demand them. I don't think you'll be able to show them then. Because I can't see you, Ethel, putting up a huge sum of money for a ranch in South America. A ranch like that normally costs millions. In a country like Pataguaya it would have struck you as a risky investment at best. And as a luxury for holidays, it would be too far away to be worth the effort of running it. Your trip down there last winter was your first in years.

"No, I have too much respect for your well-known money-sense, Ethel, to think that you would have put up so large a sum, even to please Jerry. A token payment, perhaps, yes—a few thousand dollars, so that the deed could be officially recorded. But it seems to me entirely likely that the *estancia* was in essence a gift from General Silvestre, to show his appreciation of Jerry's help. He must have had many properties like that, confiscated from his enemies, to hand out to the people who had been and still were useful to him."

His lips still amused, Jerry shook his head at her. "So I own a ranch in Pataguaya. So it was in danger of being expropriated by the revolutionary government. So I didn't want to lose it. So like a lot of other people, I was in favor of Silvestre's return to power. Are you trying to make a motive for murder out of that? Cobwebs and moonshine. Things have been too much for you, Sarah. You need a rest."

"Don't try to sidetrack me," Sarah said. "I've been around, I know how things work in government, and the ghost of a dead husband is haunting my heart. I never said the preservation of the title to the ranch was your motive, although I have no doubt it figured in your

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thoughts. No, what we're talking about is the *way* you got the ranch. How much did you pay for it, Jerry?"

His smile stayed on his lips as he ran a hand through his handsome white hair. "I don't like to see an attractive young woman play the prosecuting attorney in my house."

"Then I'll put it this way," said Sarah. "Are you prepared to let me raise the question in my article? It will be an interesting question for a lot of readers, including some in the State Department, in Justice, and even in the White House. Because, Jerry, if as an ambassador you accepted a valuable gift from the ruler of the foreign nation to which you were accredited, you committed a major crime. If you helped to put a hundred million dollars of your government's money into the hands of a South American dictator, and you took a payment in return, you may have to spend years in jail, lose your citizenship, and live out your life in disgrace. That, Jerry, I consider an adequate motive for murder."

Barbara uttered a little cry. "No, Sar," she said thickly. "Please. Not Grandpa."

He smiled at his granddaughter, but when he turned back to Sarah the smile was gone, and his voice was harsh. "Don't be a fool," he said. "And don't think I'm one. Leaving aside the matter of integrity and honor, since you evidently don't believe in mine—leaving that aside, do you imagine I would have taken the risks involved in letting Silvestre give me the ranch?"

"Not if you thought there was a risk. But who was going to know? No doubt documents of purchase were provided to show that you had paid a large sum for the ranch. With Silvestre in power you felt safe. At the time no one dared challenge him. And the temptation to accept the ranch must have been very strong, irresistible. The desire to own something of your own, Jerry, to be rich in your own right—that must have been nagging at you for years."

"Jerry!" Nickie cried. "Don't let her talk to you like that!"

He had recaptured something of his insouciance. "Let her talk. She's overwrought. The sooner she gets rid of this nonsense, the sooner we can put it behind us. She'll come to her senses."

Sarah clasped her hands around the glass in her hands. As if there had been no interruption, she said, "It's hard to keep such a thing secret, Jerry. Down in Pataguaya, some people must have known. Up here, some must have guessed. Nobody ever explained just why you resigned from your post, and why you never received another appointment. Somewhere in the State Department there must have been a suspicion, but probably not enough facts to warrant an investigation. Besides, the Department hates scan-

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dal. They'd want to avoid that wouldn't they, Kirk?"

His face was wooden. "You're telling this," he said. "And you'll regret it."

"Will I? Let's see. It's pretty obvious what must have happened when the revolution threw Silvestre out of Pataguaya. The original owner of the *estancia* would naturally demand its return. The new government then sequesters the ranch, and begins to investigate the circumstances under which it was transferred to you, Jerry. And suddenly you're in great danger. If it comes out that there is something phony in the documents of purchase, if your bank records are subpoenaed by a Federal court, that could be the end."

Kirk said with open anger, "If, if, *if!*"

"Don't panic, Kirk," she shot back. "Here are some facts. You gave them to me yourself. The White House favored the Pataguayan democrats. It looked as if the loan was assured. You had no reason for delay. But once you heard about the ranch being seized—there was your excuse. You could insist that it be returned to its American owner —to Jerry—before the negotiations continued."

"Well, what of it?" Kirk demanded. "Perfectly sound policy. There are plenty of Congressmen who would back me on that."

"Perhaps. The essential fact remains that you could have deferred the question of the ranch until later, and pushed ahead with the loan, if you had wanted to. Do you deny that?"

"I neither deny or affirm anything to you. Why should I?"

"To ease your conscience, perhaps. At any rate, it's plain enough how you and Jerry reasoned. The immediate danger was that the Pataguayan government would send Olivarez proof that the ranch had been given to Jerry by Silvestre. If that story broke—disaster. Jerry rose to the occasion. Olivarez had to be made safe for the Cheevers. He had to become their friend. So Arturo was invited to your famous parties, and you all made much of him. He was introduced to Barbie. I don't think you understood what was happening, Barbie. I believe you truly fell in love with him, and he with you. But you were given every encouragement. They hoped that as a potential son-in-law—or even as the lover of their granddaughter—Arturo would play their game and help cover up the scandal if things came to a crisis."

"Sarah," said Barbie. Her eyes were wide and dark.

"Poor Barbie. Those stolen weekends when you came down from school to see Arturo. They knew and they were glad. They were using your love to protect themselves."

"Oh, no," the girl whispered. "No." She began to cry.

"Yes," said Sarah. "It's best to

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know, Barbie, even if it hurts. Nothing can be concealed now. Underneath all the glitter and the elegance that's the kind of people they are."

"Never mind, Barbie." Cheever waved a reassuring hand at her. "It's all a fantasy, without a smidgen of proof. Personally, I'd like to hear how it ends."

"Yes, it's fascinating in a mad sort of way," Ethel said, "I'll need another drink. Fred, please?"

"Anybody else?" said Fred, rising. His face was curiously relaxed and agreeable, as if he had not heard what Sarah had been saying, as if he were playing host at a friendly gathering. "Kirk? Sarah?" he said.

"I've still got most of this," said Sarah.

"Don't let us interrupt you, Sar," Ethel said. "It's really quite exciting. Better than the Late Late Show, which I might have been looking at if you weren't here."

Fred spoke from the bar. "If she ever gets tired of newspaper work, she has a great career ahead of her as a novelist."

Sarah sensed that their resistance was mounting; they seemed to find moral support in one another; together they offered a challenge that none of them was capable of alone. Sarah met it head on.

"You will need those drinks," she said. "Unfortunately for you, Olivarez was an honest man and a patriot. You could not bribe him, not even with Barbie. When he heard from his government who the owner of the seized property was, he was bound to suspect. Did his manner show it and alarm you? That must have been when Kirk made his fatal move."

Their eyes swung to him. "I don't know what you're talking about," Kirk said.

"Don't you, Kirk? You felt that if Olivarez got out of hand, you might be vulnerable. You wanted to cover yourself. So you went to Tom."

Jerry sent a curious glance at Kirk, and Sarah said, "Didn't you know, Jerry? Yes, Kirk was playing both ends against the middle. He told me himself—he wanted Tom to do a column that would put the blame for the stalled negotiations on Olivarez. He wanted Tom to believe that Olivarez had been bribed by Silvestre to block the loan."

"Of course," said Kirk. "That's what I thought. Naturally I wanted him exposed."

"If Tom had fallen for Kirk's play," Sarah went on, "if he had cast doubt on Olivarez' loyalty, the man's value as a negotiator might easily have been destroyed. Everybody in Washington respected Tom as a conscientious reporter. Anything Olivarez said in his own defense would have been discounted. The Pataguayan government might well have recalled him. There would have been a standstill in the negotiations. The heat might have been

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taken off the question of your ranch, Jerry—and Kirk would have been in the clear."

Kirk said, throwing out exasperated hands, "What can you do with a woman like that? She twists everything."

Fred, his expression still one of bland unconcern, distributed more drinks and sat down.

"Where you went wrong, Kirk," Sarah continued "was in not making sufficient allowance for Tom's integrity as a journalist. He was your friend, yes, but he would never have published your version of the story without first giving the victim a chance to clear himself. He took Arturo to lunch, heard his side, and believed him. That was when your debacle began."

"Ethel is right," said Kirk. "You've become neurotic, Sar, if not worse."

"That's your last line of defense, isn't it? But it won't do, Kirk. When we locate Olivarez, it will all come out. Tom's last letter to me said that he was hot on the trail of the conclusive document. You must have been wild with fear when you realized that Tom had guessed the truth. Perhaps he himself told you. It would have been like Tom to give you fair warning, as people he had once called his friends. Of course you talked it over among yourselves. Tom had become a menace to you all. And one of you decided that he had to die."

Fred's expression changed suddenly to one of shock. Raising his glass, he drained it.

"Fred!" said Nickie sharply. "Are you trying to get tight?"

"Oh, he needed that drink," Sarah said. "I think he has just realized what actually happened." Despite herself, her voice rose a little. "The question in the murderer's mind was, how? It would have been extremely risky to try to kill Tom in his own house. To get him to come here was the obvious course. But you couldn't afford to have a suspicious corpse found on the premises. He had to be killed by some slow-acting agent that would assure his being out of here when he died. And the death had to seem accidental.

"Then came the brilliant idea—tetanus. Everyone was aware that your gardener had been infected not long before, and there must have been a good deal of family talk about the nature of the toxin. Somebody knew that if a powerful injection of tetanus germs entered the bloodstream, the victim couldn't be saved by the normal dose of antitoxin. Isn't that right, Fred?"

He started, opened his mouth, and closed it soundlessly. His mother spoke instead, sharply. "Stop wasting our time. We've been too patient with you. If you think you know something, speak out."

Sarah said, "I know something. I know about agar-agar." They stared at her. "Fred told me how to make the tetanus culture. Take some of

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the bacilli—and they were in the fertilizer your gardener used—put them in a little bottle full of agar-agar—and in three days, you've got your murderous brew. Right, Fred? Agar-agar. A gelatine, made from seaweed. It comes from Southeast Asia, where they use it in food. The Javanese like it in soup. I've seen it in food shops in Jakarta. The wonderful texture of that soup you served tonight, Ethel, came from agar-agar. Pilang gets it, of course, in his special cans from Java. When I asked him if he had missed a can about the time of Tom's death, he was disturbed. He, too, may have guessed."

Jerry laughed and said lightly, "That is really mean of you, Sarah. It's one thing to accuse us of murder—but to upset Ethel's pet chef is an unspeakably dirty trick."

Nickie looked at him, nodded without comprehension, pointed at Sarah, as if to stab her, and said throatily, "A viper in our bosom."

Subduing a temptation to smile, Sarah managed to keep her voice low-pitched and strong. "Yes, Nickie—and what a bosom! I wondered if it could have harbored the passion that killed Tom. As a doctor's wife, you could have known enough to make the tetanus culture. But this murder demanded more ingenuity than you are capable of. Still, you played your part. That walk of yours in the garden with Arturo. I'm sure Fred knows about it, so I'm not revealing secrets. Anyway, I'm not in the mood for delicacy. To do you justice, I don't think you were consciously trying to steal your daughter's lover. No, I prefer to think you knew how important Olivarez was to Jerry, and you were alarmed by the change in Olivarez' attitude. You had the misbegotten idea that Barbie was failing with him, and that you might be better able to hold him to the family."

There was a moment's dead stillness; then Nickie sprang from her chair, took a swift step, and slapped Sarah hard in the face. Before she could strike again, Kirk rose and grabbed her arms. She whirled on him, violently threw off his grip, and rushed from the room.

After a moment, her husband hurried after her, and Nickie's voice could be heard, screaming at him. Slowly the others turned back to Sarah, who was still sitting, with a hand to her stinging cheek. She said, "I underrated Nickie. She has a certain force, after all."

Fred came back to the room, embarrassment in every feature. "She's gone upstairs," he said.

"Sit down," said his mother. "Sarah, I won't apologize for Nickie. I'm tempted to do the same thing myself."

"Not with all those diamonds on your hand, please, Ethel. They look lethal. Perhaps it would be best if you just listened for another minute or two. Because now I want to show you how clever the murderer was.

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Drugging Tom's drink. Waiting for him in the garden. Beckoning him to the rosebushes by the beam of a small flashlight. Having the hypodermic needle ready. It took imagination of a kind to scratch Tom's arm where no one was likely to look for a while, and to inject the tetanus in the middle of the scratch. For that, the flashlight must have come in handy. Oh, it was all well thought out by someone accustomed to planning."

"Listen," said Kirk. "For the last time, think what you're doing."

"Let me finish, Kirk. At first I wondered if you were the murderer. You were in the garden, supposedly looking for Tom, before Nickie and Arturo found him. I thought perhaps if I frankly shared my suspicions with you, somehow you would betray yourself. But you didn't, and as I considered the facts, I couldn't see the cautious Kirk Norwin taking the risk of murder. Nor could I see in either Jerry or Fred the strength of will to commit a murder that required high-powered planning and sustained drive."

"And so you come to me," said Ethel. "I'll hear you out, Sarah, because it is really quite amusing, but please be brief. I must get to bed. I'm simply exhausted."

"Yes, Ethel. The sleeping pills don't help much, do they? Are they the same you put in Tom's drink when you stood with him at the bar that night? No doubt you dissolved them first. But you shouldn't have told people that he was drunk. Kirk knew better—and Tom himself. That lie of yours made me suspicious. I wondered, too, about all the gossip that Tom and I had split up. Was that wishful thinking on your part? Were you hoping I would not come back to arouse unpleasant memories and ask troublesome questions?"

"Wonderfully imaginative," said Ethel. "But a bit far-fetched, don't you think?" She turned to smile at her husband.

The other faces opposite Sarah were frozen masks, as she said, "All the means were available to you, Ethel. You use adrenalin for your asthma—that means injections and possession of a hypodermic. No one had better access than you to Pilang's stock of agar-agar. And with the means at hand, you created your opportunity. It was you who suggested to Jerry that he get Tom into the dark garden, when the drug began to take effect. I suppose you were waiting there, wearing a dark coat. It must have fallen open at the last minute. The sparks of light that Tom saw just before you pushed him into the bushes—was that the glitter from one of your golden jackets, catching the glow from the windows of the house? You needed a little flashlight to use during the injection. It was a very handsome gold one that you gave to Kirk a little later, as a Christmas gift. No doubt you wanted to be rid of it."

Ethel said, "That's rude again.

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Go home, Sarah. I've had enough of this. Drink up, everybody, and let's go to bed." Her voice was loud and domineering, and the great diamonds gleamed on her fingers as she raised her drink.

Her mouth dry, Sarah looked at her glass, and although the ice in it had long since melted, she brought the glass to her lips.

"I'm tired, too, Ethel. Very tired. I can't stop you from leaving. But someone will listen to me. So you'd better hear me out. You're a competent woman—your parties show that. You were a competent murderer. Of course, you'd had training as a hospital aid during the war—that helped. Everyone must have thought you were perfectly splendid, volunteering to stand by Tom before the regular nurse came. But you would have been worried, for fear the antitoxin that Fred gave Tom might pull him through after all. Did you take advantage of his condition, after the morphine had put him to sleep, to inject still another dose of the tetanus, to be sure of finishing him?

"That would have been in character for you. You don't like to leave things to chance. You felt quite safe. The doctor was your own son, and if he suspected anything, he would keep it to himself. There would be no autopsy. You could count on Jerry's silence, too. Kirk—you guessed about him, too, didn't you? That's why you were so determined to shift the blame on Olivarez. You didn't want Ethel's apple cart upset. After all, some of the apples in it were yours. You all entered into a tacit conspiracy to cover up the hollowness and corruption of your world—even if it meant condoning a murder."

Sarah passed her hand across her forehead, closed her eyes for a long moment, and with an effort forced herself to sit erect. Jerry said, "That's a lot of circumstantial bunk. You haven't proved a thing. Kirk or I might have had a reason for fearing Tom—but Ethel?"

"You don't have to be told, Jerry. Better than any of us, you know that the driving force of her life has always been the need for recognition, for the right kind of publicity, for the pretense of being a political power behind the scenes. Your parties, Ethel—your red wig—your diamonds—your costumes—they all give you away. A scandal over Jerry's ranch—possibly a Congressional investigation of him—prosecution in the courts—that would have destroyed everything you have built up, everything you have striven for. Gone would be the prestige, the parties, the popularity, the free publicity, the influential friendships. That's the motive I shall suggest in my article."

A tight smile curved the ends of Ethel's painted lips. She said, "You know, Sarah, I don't think you will write that article. I really don't." She leaned toward Jerry and said,

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"Don't worry, dear. She won't do anything to hurt us."

Their eyes met; Jerry's widened and shifted to the blue glass in Sarah's hand. Sarah nodded. "Jerry knows what you mean, Ethel. So do I. While we were talking in the supper room, I saw your eyes. You felt, of course, that I might be getting too close to the truth. I mustn't be allowed to stir up trouble. Something in my drink would solve the problem. If, after I got back home, I were found dead from, say, some common poison—how nice that would be. You could say sympathetically to people—'Poor girl, she was terribly despondent—quite deranged—we all noticed it. I was afraid she might take her own life, and she did.'

"It would have been such an easy way out, wouldn't it, Ethel? And not hard to arrange. A little talk here tonight—the portable bar. I'm the only Scotch drinker in the crowd—it would be safe to put something in the bottle from which my drink would be poured. A solution of barbiturates, perhaps—similar to what you used to drug Tom, but this time strong enough to kill, and with plenty of whiskey to cover the taste. You would not even have to do the pouring. Someone else would hand me the poisoned drink—no one would suspect you—and later, of course, you could dispose of the bottle and my glass."

She saw Fred's shocked eyes turn to his mother, who had risen and was staring fixedly at the glass in Sarah's hand.

Sarah held it out. The tumbler was still almost full of its liquid.

"I have only been pretending to drink it, Ethel. I want to keep it for the police, and the bottle too, of course." She put down the glass, and rising, went to the bar.

Barbie screamed as Ethel snatched Sarah's glass, hurled it to the thickly carpeted floor, and shattered it with a thrust of her high heel. Plunging to the bar, she caught hold of the bottle for which Sarah was reaching, seized it by the neck, and with the whiskey pouring down her jacket, lifted it for a blow.

Jerry caught her by the arm, saying, "No, Ethel!"

"You weakling!" she raged. "You fool! Are you going to let her go? She'll ruin us."

Her family and Kirk were on their feet, surrounding her. Suddenly she dropped the bottle, and covering her face with her hands, let out a long hoarse scream, like that of a wounded animal.

Sarah said softly, "Perhaps I won't write that article just yet. You all know that sooner or later the truth will come out. Live with that knowledge, all of you—if you can. Good night."

She picked up her handbag, and without looking back, left the house.

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